MARSH LIGHTS

RACHEL SWETE MACNAMARA

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MARSH LIGHTS

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BY

RACHEL SWETE MACNAMARA

Author of "Stolen Honey"

"Many there be that follow marsh lights, though the stars are shining overhead"

BOSTON

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TO

GLADYS RICHARDSON

WITH MY LOVE, IN MEMORY OF PAST PLEASANT HOURS
AND IN HOPE OF FUTURE ONES

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PART I

MOONLIGHT

MARSH LIGHTS

PART I

MOONLIGHT

I

"An infinite twilight of content with nothing more to lose," Yule Amber read aloud. "What tosh! That's not worth carting to Caroline Place at any rate! An anæmic dustman may solace his soul with it, but it's certainly not the ideal for a red-blooded man." He smiled at the phrase as he tossed the slim booklet into the waste-paper basket, already full to overflowing, and glanced at his own thin hands: the hands of an artist, an enthusiast, a Romantic.

There you have his character and temperament in three words, perhaps in one, the last.

"Am I a red-blooded man?" he mused. "I wonder? Would a red-blooded man have stuck to poor Amy for ten disillusioning years and married her when the dream was past and the dreamer only too well aware that he had awakened?" He frowned, sighed, and straightened his bent shoulders. "Yes. Unless the red-blooded man were also an unmitigated cad. Yet—would the cad's way have been the kindest in the end? I don't know. It's inconceivable that Amy should have missed nothing. Who can clip the wings of a dream and put it into a cage of reality without spoiling its beauty? It was the cynical old wizard, Time, who turned the vision golden into fat, fair and forty. I daresay he changed me as extraordinarily as he did her."

The lie was a loyal one, for in his inmost heart Yule Amber knew that he had changed but little, save in externals, from the queer little boy who used to dream dreams and see visions in the attic under the eaves of his old home. Under those eaves, too, he had seen his dreams take flight, one by one.

I. To be a great artist.

That dream had had the rainbow gleam of an angel's wing as it fled.

II. Just to draw, and to go on drawing!

That one flashed in its going with the kingfisher's blue, as the bank doors closed upon it, shutting it out.

III. To find the ideal woman!

At twenty-three he had met Amy Barron, who at thirty-two still possessed a fair and blue-eyed comeliness and a charm of easy softness that had captured his young senses.

IV. To live in a home where simplicity should blend with beauty, where even poverty could not shackle high ideals, where life might be lived sweetly, kindly, if austerely.

After ten years of waiting, punctuated by the sordidness and the "glory" of war, during which Amy, who would take no risks, put the claim of relative after relative before that of her lover, this little meanly planned house in Radnor Crescent, run by a plump, amiable, fussy woman, whose ideal was "To make poor Yule really comfortable," and who almost succeeded in stifling him with frilly curtains and pink silk cushions.

V. "Plain living and high thinking!"

How could one live plainly with Amy, who loved good food and comfort and whose sole conception of masculine needs lay in Punch's dictum, "Feed the brute!"?

High thinking was difficult in a life bounded by uncongenial work on the one side and a forced intimacy with a total stranger on the other.

Yes. That was what Amy had been. Yule Amber

realized with sick dismay soon after his wedding-day that he had married a woman who was utterly alien to him in thought, word and deed.

Fortunately for her own happiness, Amy Amber grasped nothing of this. She was fond of her husband with a half-contemptuous toleration of his "queerness," which gave her a pleasant sense of superiority. She certainly made him comfortable: she imagined that she made him happy.

That was the ironic pity of it.

They met mentally nowhere. Physical contact left the fastidious Yule still unsatisfied. He craved the union of soul as well as body.

Amy would have thought this "high-falutin' nonsense" had he told her so. Souls were souls and bodies were bodies and neither had any real tangible connection with the other. . . . And Yule would cheerfully have been drawn asunder by red-hot pincers before he would have made such a confession to her.

Yule had once had many illusions. He had few now. Amy had always had delusions. She kept them intact to the end.

"No two people could be more devoted to each other than Yule and I are," she said once emphatically to Nanetty Cotes, Yule's crook-backed cousin, who had been brought up with him.

"Really?" Nanetty answered politely, while inwardly she added, "What blind bats some women are!"

Amy undisguisedly pitied Nanetty for not being married.

"Poor thin wisp! But I don't suppose any man would look at her with that crooked shoulder of hers. She's got such a sharp tongue, too! Men don't like that. They prefer a woman to be soft and comfortable." She pulled down her rose-coloured silk jumper and eyed with complacency the amplitude of her own curves. "Poor Nanetty, with her painting and her odd notions! She

hasn't the least idea, really, how to look after a man. She'd forget all about his dinner if she was copying one of those hideous stiff little pictures of hers. And she is so silent sometimes. Not a word to throw to a dog. A man likes to have some one to chat to him at his meals. I save up all the little bits of gossip for Yule, and I *know* he likes it. . . ."

And now the comfortable, chatty Amy was dead, and the thin wisp Nanetty (who really knew everything and to whom one could say anything) looked after Yule Amber to his great, but half-guilty content.

The consciousness of freedom which at times surged about him like a mighty rushing wind, at times also stirred his sensitive conscience to a pricking feeling of disloyalty towards the dead woman.

He was aware of it now as he sat at his desk in the narrow austere slip of a room, which should have been his dressing-room had he not felt the greater urgency of some little hole into which he could creep when he needed to be alone. Amy could understand his retiring to a study. She could never have seen any reason for his shutting himself up in his dressing-room.

"Amy is a wonderful discoverer — of the obvious," Nanetty had once said dryly.

Yule remembered that as he unearthed a packet of letters at the back of a pigeon-hole in his desk.

They were some of the letters which Amy had written to him in the early days of their engagement. A memory flashed back at sight of them: his one discovery, perhaps, of the obvious.

He had come across them by chance a year or two after his marriage, and had been reading them with amazement just as Amy came into the room. Was it possible that it was she who had written them? Some of them showed a tenderness, an almost passionate delicacy of feeling of which he could scarcely believe her capable, so utterly materialized had she become.

He remembered that he had started almost guiltily as she entered: flushed and stretched an instinctive hand over the scattered sheets.

"What are you doing, Yule?" she asked curiously.

"Reading old love-letters."

"Who are they from?"

"Some one you don't even know," he answered, spurred by a queer impulse.

"Then I think I ought to see them." Half laughing, half annoyed, she had stretched her hand over his shoulder, picked up a letter and glanced at it. Her comfortable chuckle roused an unacknowledged resentment. "Why, you silly old boy, they're my letters, after all!"

"Whose else could they be?"

"Then why did you say I didn't even know the person who wrote them?"

"Well, you've forgotten her, outgrown her, haven't you? You wrote those letters nearly twelve years ago. You've changed since then."

"I should think I have," smiled Amy complacently, "I was a silly sentimental creature in those days. I was always putting bits out of books into your letters to make them sound well."

"Oh! . . . Were you?" He might have known, but how should he, after all?

"We understand each other now, though, don't we?" Amy continued, her hand, heavily possessive, on his shoulder.

"Quite," Yule answered, a corresponding weight at his heart.

How vividly it all came back to him! He covered his eyes, a deep sigh wrung from him. Poor Amy! His conscience smote him. Was there anything else he could have done for her? He *had* tried, honestly.

"The best of husbands . . . the best . . ." she had murmured as she died with her hand in his.

How was it that she had not seen, had not known?

. . . Or had she? . . . The thought returned to torment him still, although it was nearly a year since her death.

There was a little knuckley knock at the door: Nanetty's knock.

He raised his head with a sense of relief. Nanetty was like a tonic wind.

"Come in," he cried eagerly.

II

Annette Cotes' early school-days had been made miserable to her by an unkind little girl who whispered or shouted in her ear (according to the occasion) the old nursery-rhyme riddle of the candle.

"Little Nanetticoat
Has a white petticoat
And a red nose!
The longer she lives
The shorter she grows!"

The sting of it lay in the sharp morsel of malicious truth it contained, for Annette, with her crooked shoulder, did not grow as did the other girls of her age, and her red hair (her one real beauty) was certainly bright enough to be compared to a candle-flame.

It was only after careful and tender probing that her aunt, Mrs. Amber (who mothered her with her own orphaned baby) discovered the hidden sore. She healed it once for all by turning the mockery into a love-name.

"My own little Nanetticoat," she called the child, and taught the nickname to the baby Yule, who immediately shortened it to Nanetty. After that the name jarred no longer, save when used by lips whose right to it she questioned.

Amy Barron had been one of these, but from her Nanetty endured the liberty in silence. With other offenders a sharp reminder—"My name is Annette, please—" had always been sufficient to prevent a repeti-

tion of the offence, but Nanetty never had the courage to do anything which might possibly hurt the woman to whom her beloved Yule was engaged.

His gallant assumptions, his brave pretences never for an instant deceived her. She felt each swift disillusionment as if it had been her own. His pin-pricks became sword-thrusts to her loyal heart, though for her pride and his she hid the vicarious hurt deep.

For Yule's sake she had tried her hardest to love Amy Barron, but she could not succeed in even liking her. For Amy Amber she had felt the profoundest pity for all that she was missing and the fiercest anger for all that she was muffing.

Nanetty knew Yule through and through. The eight years' difference in their ages infused her love for him with an almost maternal passion. She yearned over him, understood him, saw through his strength to his weaknesses, and often longed to shake him.

She entered his little room now hastily, in a dull blue overall patterned with yellow apples and green leaves, her glorious hair ruffled and untidy, a dust-smear across one thin cheek, purple shadows under her grey eyes.

"What on earth are you doing, Yule? Brooding, sentimentalizing?" she cried, with a sharp glance at the letters on his desk.

Yule looked up half guiltily, half deprecatingly, one lock of hair falling as usual into the grey eyes that were so like those now bent upon him.

"I was really tidying my desk and getting rid of what I didn't want to keep, before the furniture-movers come. There's no use in carting unnecessary rubbish with us to Caroline Place."

"No," Nanetty admitted, sinking into a chair with a sigh. "There's enough rubbish there already. I'll have to spend all day to-morrow sorting it out. You've got to come too, Yule. Cousin Henry left the house to you, remember."

"Am I likely to forget? Bless his glorious memory!" cried Yule, brushing back the errant lock. His eyes glowed with a sudden fire. "What a life we'll have, Nanetty! Just imagine—a house and five hundred a year and nothing in the world for us to do except me to draw and you to paint all day long. Think of it!"

"Ah—my painting!" Nanetty's thin brows drew together in a frown. "How I wish I could originate as you do, Yule. It seems such a feeble thing to be always copying other people's work."

"But you copy so exquisitely, old thing. Your little early Italian and Dutch pictures seem to me to be almost as good as the originals."

"*Almost!* There! You've put your finger on it. There's always something lacking in a copy. The spirit, the essence, the inspiration is missing. Now your drawing may be faulty where mine is correct, but you can create where I can only copy. That's just the difference between us. You are original where I am imitative. Don't imagine that I don't realize my limitations, and loathe them, but what's the use in kicking against steel bars? They will cage me to the end. I can't get out."

"You're tired. You're not to do another blessed thing to-night. When do we 'bend with the removers to remove'?"

"Not till Friday, thank Heaven."

"And this is Tuesday evening. Two more days in which to breathe ——"

"And in which to burn your old love-letters," said Nanetty firmly, pointing an accusing finger. "It's all over and done with now, Yule. Cut it out of your life and begin afresh. Don't go trailing cobwebs from the dusty past into your nice clean future."

"Have I been a fool or a knave, Nanetty?" asked Yule in a queer shamed whisper. "I've just been wondering."

"A bit of both, I think." Nanetty's lips drew to a

thin line as she beat a little tattoo on the edge of Yule's desk. Then she broke out suddenly, as if half against her will: "Still, it was chivalrous folly and kindhearted knavery, if there is such a thing, and I think it served its purpose in letting poor Amy die happy. But there must be no more of it, Yule. At thirty-seven you haven't got time for making any more vital mistakes. You paid for the last one with your youth. Don't play about again with the big things of life. You'll only get hurt a second time if you do. You've got an absolutely fresh start now, a chance vouchsafed to few people. Don't mess it up. Don't do exactly the same thing over again, like the people in 'Dear Brutus.' Prove Barrie the cynic that he really is by steering an entirely different course this time, and making a success of it."

"You mean ——?" he looked up quickly. That was the comfort of Nanetty: a word, a glance, a tone sufficed with her. One need never end one's sentences or even begin them properly. She understood.

"You know quite well what I mean. Let it be the real thing or nothing next time."

"Next time? Do you really want me to marry again?"

"Of course I don't. I should simply hate you to marry again. It would spoil everything. I am perfectly content with things as they are. But you won't be so for long, and it isn't natural that you should. You mustn't miss the best thing in life just so that you and I may go on leading our present happy-go-lucky bachelor existence. There are to be no ridiculous Quixotic scruples about that. I won't have it. I am ready to pack my red cotton handkerchief and slip away at a moment's notice. Remember that."

"Nanetty!"

"If you come across the big thing — Promise me, Yule."

She stopped abruptly, rose and came over to the desk. Leaning against its edge she put out one hand

and gathered Amy's spurious love-letters together, as if casually.

Yule took the groping hand in his, letters and all.

"I'll promise anything you like, old thing."

"No, no. That won't do. I'm perfectly serious, Yule."

"I find it hard to be serious when I think of Cousin Henry's windfall. Yet, even that I feel I got under false pretences. He looked on me as the steady bank clerk, pure and simple ——"

"So you were, to him."

"The merest veneer. He hadn't the faintest idea of the real lunatic me underneath, who wants to do all sorts of idiotic things, smell lilac, roll my face in white clover, draw drunken bumble-bees fighting, bay the moon like a prairie-dog, 'in such a night as this' ——"

"Well, so you can, you ingenious self-tormentor!" said Nanetty practically. "Every one has got his mad streak. In some it's genius. In some merely eccentricity. In the majority it's so overlaid by different strata of the commonplace that it never has a chance of cropping up. Perhaps old Henry's streak consisted in making you his sole heir."

"That was mad enough for anything," said Yule. "But what a heavenly madness for us! It sets us both free to do the work we like best at last."

"You don't imagine that I'm going to fold my hands in idleness and let you support me? Thanks, my boy. I value my independence too much for that."

"You and your independence!" scoffed Yule. "Aren't you still tied to old Brand?"

"Yes. For two years longer I am under contract not to copy pictures for any one but him. He pays me quite well, Yule. He says my copies always command a ready sale."

"How much does he get for them, I wonder?"

"That doesn't concern me so long as he pays me a

fair price." Nanetty pushed back her hair. "What I really came in to ask was, are you going to let Allenson have the furniture of this house at a valuation or do you wish to have a sale here?"

Yule looked at her reproachfully.

"You know I have no wishes on the subject. Yes, I have. Once we leave this detestable little house I don't want to see one item of its furniture ever again, except this old friend." He laid his hand on the desk. "I don't care who has it or what is done with it so long as it is out of my sight."

Nanetty moved as if to go. "Then I should advise you to let Allenson have it. That would save trouble all round. You don't mind if I take my painting things and the bedroom furniture that was my mother's with me?"

"Idiot!"

"There is a fire still in the kitchen range if you want to burn anything."

"Thanks."

"Or shall I?" She made a tentative gesture.

Yule took the letters out of her hand. "No. I'd rather do it myself," he answered in a low tone.

"Don't forget to write to Allenson. He wants an answer by to-morrow."

"I'll write at once and take the letter to the post myself. I want to get out."

"Prairie-dog?" She smiled at him.

"Don't be afraid. I shan't bay the moon in the purlieus of Bloomsbury." It was pleasant to be understood as Nanetty understood him. He had not yet got over the happy novelty of having it in his daily life. He stopped her with a gesture as she was leaving the room. "If we're not taking any furniture with us, why the removers? Can't we walk straight out and leave this place just as it is?"

Nanetty straightened herself wearily. This was certainly one of the moments when she wanted to shake Yule,

yet she answered with a patience that strove to dull the edge of the sharpness she felt: "My furniture has to go and your old desk. Besides, there is your mother's china and your books, to say nothing of our own personal belongings."

"No pink cushions. No bamboo. No aspidistras. No imitation lacquer. No lace chair-backs. No over-mantels. No bows. No frills. No saddle-bags," chanted Yule.

"Certainly not. And no delay in writing to Allenson and posting the letter! Lock up when you come in. The water is still hot. I'm going to have a bath and go to bed."

"Off with you, old thing. You look worn out. I'll lock the hall-door and make as little noise as possible when I come in."

Nanetty smiled: a rather twisted smile. Did he imagine that she could sleep until she knew that he was safely housed?

"Goodnight, Yule."

"Goodnight, Nanetticoat!"

III

A RED glow in the range vaguely illumined the dusk of the little kitchen across which the light from the hall gas-jet cut a sharp diagonal of yellow near the door.

Yule groped for the poker, lifted the round lid from the top of the fireplace, dropped in his packet of letters and put on the cover again.

For a moment he watched the result through the bars. The letters did not catch fire at first, they merely smouldered, sending out a faintly acrid smoke. Then a spurt of flame touched them, ran along edge after edge, curling them up until at last nothing was left but a little sheaf of brown-black flakes, the white ghosts of words standing out on them here and there.

". . . not really lived until I loved you," he read

on one curved sheet, while from another . . . "love you so it hurts . . ." sprang at him from an unremembered context.

Poor Amy. . . . Another quotation! She had never loved any one or anything so that it hurt. . . . Poor comfortable Amy! . . .

Well, that episode was ended—or was it an epoch? At times the days of his youth seemed distant and unreal as if they belonged to some previous and half-forgotten existence. They were over now, the days of "long, long thoughts" and rainbow visions. . . . Or were they?

Surely at thirty-seven a man had not yet reached even the prime of life. Surely a semblance of youth was still to be found on the sunny side of forty. Not alone that unconquerable youth of the spirit against which even the wizard Time has no efficacious spells, but a visible, tangible, physical youth, of active limbs, firm muscles, perfect health and the joy of life.

Despite his pallor and the sedentary life he had been obliged to lead, Yule Amber was neither slack nor flabby. He had kept up the "physical jerks" of his Army days to the best of his ability, and walked for exercise on every possible opportunity. The Pauline warfare between flesh and spirit shook him occasionally, but always in the end the spirit conquered. This gave a finely-sharpened outline to features which were in no other way remarkable, deepened the expression of eyes grey as rain, and lent a whimsical sweetness to a mouth that might otherwise have twisted cynically.

Amber straightened his shoulders as if he were throwing off a burden as he closed the hall-door of No. 23, Radnor Crescent, behind him and went down the infinitesimal pathway that led to the iron gate which shut it off from the road outside.

Even in the moonlight the smug little houses owned no borrowed touch of mystery. They looked, with their shuttered windows, like blank faces; any secret or personality

that they might be holding in their shallow depths was carefully hidden behind their uniform veneer of respectability.

Amber always breathed more freely once he left the cramping Crescent behind him and turned into the more spacious squares and wider echoing streets of Bloomsbury proper. The houses there had their own air of faded gentility, their own pathetic consciousness of a day that was done; but there was a distinctive atmosphere, an essence of a happier past, a veritable if now vanished possession.

Radnor Crescent had no atmosphere. It never had been, it never would be any other than it was; a row of skimpy, jerry-built houses, poor in design, mean in execution, with a pillar-box at the far end of it like a vermilion note of exclamation drawing attention to a foolish sentence.

Amber dropped in his letter and wandered on in the silent ecstasy which the deep blue wonder of a star-pricked sky always induced in him.

The moon was high, small, remote, the outlines of houses cut sharply black against the blue. Now and again a prowling cat crossed the pools of moonlight and lost itself immediately in the blackness of the shadows beyond.

Once in a way a yellow-eyed taxi purred quietly past, like some greater cat straying from the adjoining jungle that was London.

Amber wandered on until he found himself in Regency Square. The windows of the tall old houses around him showed rims of gold where the light within outlined drawn blinds, or glowing orange squares where windows had been left uncurtained. From one came the sound of a gramophone: a gay Neapolitan canzonetta that held the warm pagan South in its lilt: from another the tinkle of an old piano on which firm masculine fingers thrummed out rag-time.

Amber crossed the road to the Square garden, and, holding the railings, peered within.

The bare trees loomed above him in masses of tangled tracery in which, as he looked upwards, the stars seemed to be caught. The trim walks, the sooty shrubs, the thrusting iris-spears in the dim borders, the moon-lit spaces, the depths of velvet darkness, all were touched by the magic of night to a mystery unknown by day.

As Amber gazed, a movement near the railings at right angles to him caught his eye, and reminded him of the story of the homeward-bound club-man who, seeing a scarlet lantern bobbing about among the trees of his own square, concluded that some one was looking for some lost possession and went to offer his assistance. The pale lady who owned the Chinese lantern had met such banality with scorn.

"Can't you see that I am trying to create an atmosphere?" she demanded superbly.

Amber smiled at the recollection. "I rather wish it had been my fate to encounter that atmospheric intellectual. And yet, I don't know, after all, that I want to meet pseudo Romance in the mask of a *poseuse*. Dear old Nanetty and her promises! And I didn't make any in the end. . . . The big thing. The real thing. Is it for me, I wonder? How many thousands live and die without ever even touching the fringe of it? Could I ever love some one so that it hurt. Nanetty . . . mother. . . . Ah, but that's different! . . . Yes, I could. I know I could. . . . But am I myself big enough? I don't know. All I want at present is to grasp life with both hands, to give, to worship, to breathe free air, to discover daily the miracle of the commonplace. Is that too much to ask? It's a good deal after all, if one comes to analyze all that it implies."

Something moved again by the farther railings, a gleam of white, a darkness. Yule Amber's attention was definitely caught by this time. It seemed to his quickened

perceptions that it was not an ordinary or an accountable movement. The white gleam fluttered once more like a signal, a summons, and was still.

Suddenly he felt as if some call of the spirit reached him, some agonized appeal for aid, though no sound was audible. It was as if some one or something had pulled at his heart-strings. So definite was the sensation that he turned and set off along the pavement at a pace which quickened almost to a run to meet, for the first time in his life, Romance without a mask!

IV

A GIRL crouched by the railings, her ungloved hands still clinging to the iron bars. The light from the distant gas-lamp detached the whiteness of them, of her face and of her dress from the darkness of her fur coat, which melted inconspicuously into the back-ground of shadow.

Her disordered hair was dusky and abundant. Her eyes were like pools of blackness in the pallor of her face. They searched Yule's as he bent over her, with the calm acquiescence of despair.

"I don't believe I can go a step farther," she said tonelessly.

"Where do you want to go to?" asked Yule, as gently as one would of a child. She seemed to him at that moment only a child who must not be frightened at any cost, so young she looked, so tired.

"Bed, more than anything else." She sighed and closed her eyes. Her lashes lay black against cheeks whose whiteness alarmed Yule.

"Shall I try to find a taxi for you?" he asked.

"Oh, no, no. I haven't anywhere to go."

"How is that? Have you no home?"

"Not now." She shuddered and closed her eyes again.

"Your people ——" he began tentatively.

"I have no people."

"What brings you here, then?"

She shuddered again, but said nothing. Amber felt puzzled.

Here was a young girl, richly dressed — he was suddenly aware of the glimmer of pearls at her throat and the sparkle of silver brocaded shoes — wandering alone in a Bloomsbury Square, confessing to having no home, no people, and nowhere to go to.

What was the key to the enigma.

"Have you any money?" he asked simply, quite unaware of the sinister implications which might be read into such a question.

The girl was too exhausted by fatigue and emotion to be suspicious. She answered with an echo of his own frankness, "No. I forgot to bring away my purse."

"Did you run away from home?"

"I told you I had no home."

"From the place where you lived, then?" he pursued, with the same deliberate gentleness.

"Yes." The soft young lips set themselves in a suddenly implacable line.

"Would you like me to take you back there?"

"I am never going back."

"Why not?"

"You can't go back to a place that has been destroyed by an earthquake."

"Was that what happened?"

"Yes. Everything is ruined, defiled ——" she broke off and looked around her as though she had suddenly awakened to a sense of her surroundings. "What place is this?"

"Regency Square, Bloomsbury."

"Bloomsbury? Why, that's miles from Hampstead, isn't it?" she cried.

"Miles," he agreed. "Have you walked here from Hampstead?"

"I suppose I must have. I don't remember. When I ran out of the house ——" she stopped again and looked up at Yule. "What am I to do?"

"I don't know," he answered rather helplessly. "I could take you to an hotel, of course, but it might look rather odd. . . . It's late, you know, and you've got no luggage and no ——" he stopped abruptly.

If only Nanetty were here she would know what to do, what to advise. Suddenly light dawned. Why, the only thing to do, of course, was to take her to Nanetty. It was an inspiration.

The girl was regarding him impersonally.

"Are you married?" she began. "Do you ——?"

"I—am a widower," Yule interposed hastily, with a swift inward smile both at his haste and his sudden recognition of the respectability of his state. "I live quite close to this with an older cousin—practically a sister—who looks after me. If you will trust me sufficiently to come back with me she will look after you, too." With a little glow of pleasure at his own common-sense, he remembered the range fire and the consequent hot water. "She will get you a hot bath and put you to bed at once."

"That sounds heavenly," said the girl with a long weary sigh. "A hot bath and bed . . . to sleep the clock round . . . and to forget. . . . Help me up, please."

Yule unclasped her stiffened fingers from the railings and gently pulled the girl to her feet. She swayed towards him. He put his arm round her to save her from falling and she leaned against him with another long sigh of utter fatigue. A thrill ran through him as her head dropped on his shoulder and her hair brushed against his cheek. Its faint elusive perfume stirred his senses to a sudden tumult.

What wine was at his lips? He had scarcely time to savour the exquisite disturbance of the sensation when the

heavy tread of approaching feet obtruded itself on his consciousness.

"Could you pull yourself together a bit?" he said. "Lean on me and try to look as if you belonged to me. A policeman is coming and I don't want to rouse his suspicions."

"Of what could he suspect you?" asked the girl wearily, raising her head, and pulling up her coat round her neck.

Yule had no desire to enlighten her.

"Both by duty and inclination they are a suspicious race," he returned as lightly as he could. "That's good, just make one effort, and we'll be at my house in a few minutes. If I put my arm round you would it be a help?"

"Perhaps," answered the girl tonelessly.

With quickened pulses Yule slipped his arm about her, and half-supported, half-carried her along the pavement. In a moment the policeman passed them with no more than a glance.

Two lovers in the moonlight, lingering in the quietude of Regency Square. There was nothing suspicious in that. It was a sight which might be seen any night.

Yule breathed a little breath of relief as the sound of the heavy responsible footsteps faded into silence. He had no wish to be accused of an abduction. Yet, even in that moment he knew that his was the desire of primitive man, and that underneath his chivalrous longing to comfort and succour the helpless girl, lay a wilder longing to snatch her up, throw her over his shoulder and flee with her to some fastness among the mountains.

"This is red-blooded man with a vengeance!" he thought. "You cad, pull yourself together. The little thing trusts you like a child."

The girl dragged her feet across the road beside him unconscious of anything but her own fatigue and misery. Yule was no more to her than a helping hand stretched out through the darkness that had enveloped her. He was

impersonal, sexless as an angel. It seemed to her that she had been walking painfully by his side for years. The throbbing of her swollen feet became almost intolerable, obliterating for the moment her mental anguish. She stopped.

"I can't go any farther."

He tried to coax her. "It is only a few steps. See, here is the pillar-box at the end of the Crescent. My house is about half way up."

"I can't — I can't ——" Her voice dragged as her weary steps had done. Her body drooped and sagged towards him.

"Then I must carry you," said Yule, stooping and lifting her with an effort.

He was slight of physique and little if anything over the average height, and the girl, though young and slim, lay a dead weight in his arms. Yet his heart sang and he was unconscious of the effort or the bracing of his taut muscles as he carried his burden up the remaining strip of pavement that lay between him and his destination. The other houses were still and lightless. They watched him with blank eyes. The gate of his own was ajar. He pushed it open with his foot and entered, pausing at the hall door.

"Can you stand for a moment? I've got to find my latch-key."

"Yes." She slipped from his arms and stood shivering as she waited for him to open the door.

His hand trembled as he fumbled for the latch. His arms seemed cold and strangely empty without her. He did not know what had happened to him.

The gas-jet in the hall was still alight. It bubbled curiously within its pink and green glass lantern making the shadows flicker. Yule put his arm round the girl again and half-led, half-carried her into the dining-room, where he placed her in one of the saddle-bag armchairs near the now cold fireplace.

"Are you comfortable? Do you mind if I leave you for a minute? I'm only going to fetch Nanetty."

The girl sighed. "I shall be all right."

Yule ran out into the hall and up the narrow stairs two steps at a time.

"Nanetty! Nanetticoat!" he called excitedly. "I want you."

Nanetty, candle in hand, ran out of her bedroom, her dull blue dressing-gown hastily wrapped around her, her red hair falling over her shoulders in two thick plaits, her face sharp with anxiety.

"What is it? What has happened, Yule?" she cried.

"I've found a girl, dreadfully tired and frightened, with nowhere to go. I didn't know what to do with her, so I brought her here to you. I knew you'd know."

"A girl?" For a moment something seemed to clutch Nanetty's heart and give it a quick little squeeze. Then Yule's trust, his absolute childlike confidence in her made its never-failing appeal. So had it been from his baby days: broken toy, cut finger, maimed bird or beast had always been brought to Nanetty — he knew that she would know what to do, dear helpless Quixote! . . . "Where is she? What have you done with her?"

"I left her in an armchair in the dining-room. I thought a hot bath and bed as soon as possible ——"

"But where is she to sleep? She must have my bed ——"

"No, no, she must have mine. I can sleep anywhere, on the couch, in a chair — it doesn't matter."

"Is she young?"

"Little more than a child. Come and see her for yourself."

As Nanetty followed him downstairs she had a sudden remembrance of his promise to come in as quietly as possible lest he should disturb her. Her lips curved to a questioning smile as she wondered what maimed thing he had brought to her now. He had never brought anything

but his clothes to Amy to mend. It was Nanetty who had always taken charge of his spiritual rags and tatters, except during the three arid years of his marriage. The thought warmed her now.

V

"LIGHT the gas, Yule."

The quick spurt of a match transformed the quiet dusk of the room to an almost garish brilliance of hard red walls, light oak furniture, red and blue carpet and saddle-bag covered chairs.

Nanetty caught her breath when she saw the girl in the armchair. Her beautifully-shaped head lay like a flower-bud against the bright hues of the velvet, the pallor of her softly-curved cheek was like a magnolia petal, the hands that drooped by her side in helpless fatigue were like uncurling lilies.

Only flower-similes flashed through Nanetty's mind as she gazed in astonishment at Yule's trove.

She had visioned some waif of the streets, poor, helpless, derelict. In her wildest imaginings she had not thought of anything so delicate, so exotic to her surroundings, as the girl who lay asleep in the chair before her. Every detail spoke of luxury, of a standard of living far more costly than their own. Nanetty's shrewd grey eyes took in the rich simplicity of the girl's attire: the fur coat, the plainly-cut white evening frock with its silver girdle, the silk stockings and silver brocaded shoes, the glimmer of pearls on a neck no less white and round than they.

"What have we here?" she thought in quick dismay.

Yet surely innocence dwelt in the rounded curves of that young cheek and throat, and purity in the soft lips, red still with the red of childhood, fresh and dewy. As if the unspoken aspersion had suddenly touched her, the girl opened her eyes.

Such eyes Nanetty had never seen: large, liquid, brown as pansies or bog-streams: dark and tragic now in their appeal, as she gazed around her, startled.

"Oh, where am I? Where am I?" she cried wildly, shaken with an uncontrollable tremor.

In an instant Nanetty had taken the fluttering hands in hers. This was no time for comment or conjecture. The moment for action had come.

"It's all right. You are with friends," she said in a brisk reassuring tone. "Yule, put the kettle on the gas-ring and make some bovril. The jar is on the kitchen dresser. Then fill a hot-water bottle."

Yule, thankful for the necessity for action, flew to do her bidding. Nanetty went to the over-ornate side-board, took out a small bottle of brandy, put a little into a glass, added some water to it and took it over to the shivering girl.

"Drink this as medicine. It will help to pull you together."

As the girl drank, the glass tinkled against her teeth. She coughed at the fiery taste of the liquid, gulped, and made a little face as she finished it.

"Thank you," she said as she handed back the glass to Nanetty.

The stimulant appeared to take instant effect. Life seemed to flow back into face and limbs as she leaned back in the armchair, closing and unclosing her hands.

"I'm awfully tired," she said childishly.

"I know. Do you feel as if you would like a bath or would you rather go straight to bed?"

"I'd rather go straight to bed, please. I believe I should fall asleep in a bath."

"Can you get upstairs all right, or shall I call Yule to come and help you?" asked Nanetty.

The girl did not move. "What did you say his name was?"

"Yule — Yule Amber."

"And yours?"

"Annette Cotes."

From Nanetty's silence it dawned on the girl that something was expected of her.

"Oh, mine — mine is Jessamy Wyatt," she said suddenly. "Then you're not his wife?"

"No. His cousin." A swift red sprang to Nanetty's cheek as if the question had flicked her.

"His cousin. . . . Ah, I remember. He said that. He told me that he was a widower. . . . How stupid of me!"

Nanetty stared. . . . How odd of Yule to have told this strange girl that he was a widower! What on earth had he meant by it? Was it with some extraordinary idea of reassuring her, or what had been his motive for such an apparently unnecessary disclosure? With all her knowledge of him she felt for the moment puzzled.

"Let me help you up to bed," she suggested. "You will enjoy the bovril more when you are comfortably settled."

"Bed is the one thing I want at present," sighed the girl. "I am too tired even to think — thank God!" The last two words shot out with sudden passion.

"Don't attempt to think," ordered Nanetty whimsically. "Half the mischief in the world is done by thinking at the wrong time. Let me get you into bed. You'll have to put up with one of my night-dresses."

"It will do quite well," answered the girl tonelessly.

Nanetty cast a quick glance at her as she slipped an arm round her and helped her to rise.

"The girl must be suffering from some severe mental shock," she thought, "to accept this most unusual situation as a matter of course. Spoilt, too, probably. The spoilt child takes everything for granted. Well, spoilt or not, the only thing is to get her into bed now. To-morrow we may be able to straighten things out."

She kept her arm about Jessamy as they squeezed out

through the narrow door and went up the steep stairs together.

"Is that bovril ready yet, Yule?" she asked as they passed the kitchen door.

"Not yet. The kettle seems determined not to boil," he answered anxiously. "Can I help you?"

"No. Don't desert the kettle," Nanetty ordered.

In spite of her reasonable outlook on life she felt a faint prick of annoyance at the girl's utter apathy, her cool acceptance of all that was being done for her.

"I shan't get out fresh sheets," she thought. "Yule's are quite good enough for her."

She hardened her heart as the girl let her undress her and even held out her feet to have shoes and stockings removed. Jessamy Wyatt sat, dumb, on the edge of the bed as Nanetty slipped her own night-gown over her bare white shoulders. She seemed to have no modesty, no proper consciousness of her surroundings. Her great eyes stared into vacancy with a look of utter misery that tugged at Nanetty's heart-strings in spite of herself.

She turned down the bed-clothes and, stooping, lifted the girl's feet on to the bed; holding her then with one hand while with the other she slipped the pillow to a more comfortable angle under her head. It was as she bent to perform this kind action that Jessamy pushed her head against her shoulder as a child might and rubbed one soft cheek against Nanetty's thin one.

"You *are* good to me," she whispered, trembling. "I — I — I — it almost makes me believe in God again — but how can I? How can I?"

She broke into a wild sobbing that racked her.

"There, there!" soothed Nanetty, gathering her into comforting arms. "He's always there, bless you, whether you believe in Him or not!"

VI

"Her name is Jessamy Wyatt, Yule, and that's all I can tell you about her at present, except that she's suffering from some dreadful shock or disillusionment, poor child."

"She has run away from the people she lived with because an earthquake destroyed everything," Yule answered. "There's tragedy in this, Nanetty."

He was sitting on the edge of the kitchen-table, swinging his foot to and fro. His eyes were curiously bright: there was a new mental alertness about him, an impression of quickened vitality.

"Perhaps," Nanetty acquiesced, suddenly conscious of the fatigue which she had forgotten in the hour's excitement. "But tragedy is a big word, Yule. She's very young and youth is extraordinarily resilient. Whatever it is, she is bound to get over it."

For the first time Nanetty seemed to Yule Amber middle-aged and inelastic of mind. He was conscious of a queer mixture of feelings. He did not want this girl — Jessamy Wyatt! What a delicious name, like a flower, so like her! — to endure tragedy, of course: still he had no desire that her feelings, her sufferings should be belittled by any one, even Nanetty. It was odd what a hot, pricking feeling disturbed him at the thought. He said nothing but drummed boyishly with his heel against the leg of the table.

"Is there any boiling water in the kettle?" asked Nanetty suddenly. "I yearn for a cup of tea. Tea at unorthodox times is the most delicious thing in the world."

"Let me make it for you." Yule, with a quick gust of penitence, slid to the floor with that new youthful alertness of his. "Poor old Nanetticoat, you must be half dead. I'll boil up the kettle again. It won't take a minute."

Nanetty leaned against the hard wooden back of the Windsor chair and watched him. It was rather nice to be

waited on for once. She let Yule fuss over her, fetch cup and saucer, milk and sugar, sensing with an intuition which was hers in all that concerned him, that his attentions were somehow tinged with penitence, for what real or imaginary failing towards her she could not yet fathom.

He refused gaily to share her tea.

"I mustn't mix my liquors," he said.

"Have you been drinking something else?" she asked, but without real curiosity, for she knew her Yule.

"Yes."

"What?"

"The wine of spring. I had deep draughts of it in Regency Square. When April comes we'll go to Kew together and intoxicate ourselves with the smell of lilac." He stopped abruptly. . . . When April comes? . . . But hadn't April come already? Wasn't there a stir of sap in the trees, a rush of buds to the branches, a singing of birds, a great scent of Spring in the air, a delicious troubling of the senses? The lovely disquiet of April rather than the first sharp challenge of March?

"Lilac!" echoed Nanetty with a sigh. "Lilac is the one smell that always makes me feel as if I had an immortal soul and hadn't really sold it to old Brand!"

"But you haven't."

"Of course I haven't, silly." She rose, pushing back her cup. "That was very reviving. Leave the things there till the morning, Yule. I'm going to bed now. Where will you sleep?"

"I shan't sleep at all, probably. I feel far too much alive. I think I'll go out and bay the moon again."

"Please don't," exclaimed Nanetty sharply. "I shan't sleep if you do for thinking of what you may bring in next time."

Yule laughed. "Poor old Nanetticoat! I shan't go out, then. Off with you in earnest this time. It must be nearly tomorrow."

"It is," said Nanetty. "Goodnight, Yule."

"Goodnight, old thing."

When she had gone Yule Amber stood looking at the faint red spark that still lingered in the kitchen range. It gleamed dully among a few grey cinders and black films of paper. As he looked he felt a sudden queer little glow of satisfaction that he had not let Nanetty burn Amy's letters, that he had burned them himself, that they were safely and completely destroyed before — what?

He took up the poker, thrust it through the bars and stirred the flakes of paper until they fell apart and crumbled into feathery ash.

Then he washed up Nanetty's cup and saucer and put away teapot and kettle, still with that vague sense of penitence of which she had been dimly aware; that new half-acknowledged feeling that he should make everything as easy for her as possible — why?

He refused for the moment to look the question fairly in the face, and trying to elude it fell asleep in the saddle-bag chair, his head resting where Jessamy's had lain, his nostrils keen for the faint elusive scent of her hair.

So Nanetty found him when she came down in the morning.

VII

"You're not to worry her with questions, Nanetty. Let her tell us as much or as little as she likes. She is our guest, remember." Yule looked at his cousin across the breakfast-table, very much the man of the house.

It was an attitude which Nanetty encouraged, but which Amy had always resented. She had liked to manage everything herself.

Nanetty's mouth went up now at one corner. So did one dark-red eyebrow. It was a quaint mannerism of hers when uncertain of her ground.

"That's all very well, my dear boy. But what are we

to do with her? You don't propose to adopt the girl, do you?"

"Don't be absurd," said Yule, flushing. "Can't we shelter a homeless girl for a few days without your making these ridiculous suggestions?"

How unusually touchy he was! . . . But Nanetty did not mean to stand any nonsense. Her way was to face any problem fair and square, and tackle it without any unnecessary bush-beating.

"They happen to be most inconvenient days," she returned. "Don't forget that we are going to Caroline Place to-day to ——"

"We can't go. Things must remain as they are until we move in on Friday. Once there we can take our own time to arrange ——"

"Do you mean this Miss Wyatt to come with us, then?" Nanetty cut in.

"Of course, if she wants to," said Yule quickly. "Surely you don't want to turn the poor child out into the street again. It isn't like you to be so inhospitable, Nanetty."

Nanetty laughed. She would not let herself get annoyed with him.

"Really you are the most ridiculously quixotic person in the world, Yule! You're a survival, an anachronism. You ought to be in a glass case in a museum."

"Because I want to give shelter to a lost child for a few days? A nice opinion you must have of the world in general."

"Jessamy Wyatt is not a child. If she were, the problem would have solved itself."

"I don't see that there is any problem. When she wakes —— Don't you think you ought to go up again, Nanetty, in case she might be awake now?"

"I've been in to her three times already. I am going to finish my breakfast before I go up again," said Nanetty firmly.

"But if she woke and were frightened ——?"

"What could there possibly be to frighten her in that most banal room of yours?" Nanetty demanded.

Yule moved the butter-dish. "It's strange to her. . . . She may not remember where she is. . . . My things are about — she mightn't understand."

"Oh, very well, then." Nanetty pushed back her chair and rose impatiently.

Yule watched her as she went through the door. . . . Poor Nanetty, her deformity was very apparent in her morning overall! It was frightfully hard lines on a woman to be made like that. Why weren't they all slim and round and beautiful as flowers? . . . It seemed unnecessarily cruel. . . .

He held his breath at the click of the opening door upstairs and listened for the sound of Nanetty's footsteps tip-toeing across the room towards the bed. There was a pause. . . . If only he could have looked over Nanetty's shoulder at that innocent sleeping loveliness. . . . It wasn't like Nanetty to be so unsympathetic, so material. She had hitherto always aided and abetted him in his whims and impulses. Why did she make all these stupid objections now? It did not occur to him that this was the first time that his Quixotisms had included a beautiful young woman.

The footsteps creaked back again. The door clicked behind Nanetty, who came rather heavily down the stairs.

"Well?" said Yule eagerly, as she entered.

"She's still asleep. . . . Yule, she's not of our class."

"Not of our class? What do you mean?" His tone was hot. He fired at the faintest imputation.

"Just what I say. She's not a worker, as we are. She belongs to the idle rich."

"How do you know?"

"Blind bat, didn't you see her clothes? Didn't you see her hands? Those hands have never done any harder

work than dressing her own beautiful person and arranging her own beautiful hair — if, indeed, she hadn't a maid to do it for her."

Yule drew a long breath. "I'm glad you think her beautiful," he said simply.

Nanetty glanced sharply at him. . . . What on earth did it matter to him whether she considered Jessamy Wyatt beautiful or not? The girl could not possibly mean anything to him — yet. What she might come to mean — Nanetty bit her lip. What complication had been suddenly thrust into their quietly-ordered lives? She must walk warily. Yule must feel that he had her behind him in this as in all other things, no matter what it cost her. After all, it was her attitude towards him that counted, not his towards her. She must never fail him.

"We both love beauty, I think," said Nanetty rather low. "We both want to live beautifully. It's rather hard sometimes, when things and people are pettily worrying, but — we'll follow our star, Yule, you and I, whatever happens."

There was a moment's pause. Yule's eyes glowed and his hands shot across the table.

"I knew I could trust you, old thing," he said huskily.

Nanetty felt rather apprehensively as their fingers gripped that she was suddenly committed to some course of action of which she was still in complete ignorance.

VIII

"THEN it's not a dream!" said Jessamy Wyatt, looking with great sleep-dazed eyes round the strange little room.

On the bamboo dressing-table stood in unfriendly juxtaposition some cheap silver-mounted toilet accessories, a pink-frilled pincushion and a man's hair-brushes. A man's coat hung on the door, and a pair of trousers lay across the back of a chair near the pink-curtained win-

dow. Masculine boots and shoes stood beneath the dressing-table and a man's fawn-coloured dressing-gown hung over the brass rail of the bedstead.

A rose-flowered eiderdown was drawn up over the big double bed which occupied most of the space in the little room and in which many a night Yule Amber had lain unhappily awake, rigid lest he should touch the sleeping Amy, from whom he had no valid reason for separating, yet from whose contact every fibre shrank at times.

"No, it's not a dream," said Nanetty. "It's quite a friendly reality. I hope you are feeling rested."

Jessamy did not answer. Her thoughts had flown elsewhere. She had suddenly remembered what the kindness of sleep had momentarily obliterated. "Then it's all true! . . . All! . . . Oh, my God!"

She turned and buried her face in the pillow, her frame shaken with a long shudder.

Nanetty stood silent for a moment, shrinking from the possible rushing in of the fool. Then she laid a thin, kindly hand on the shaking shoulder.

"Do you think you can tell me anything about it?" she asked gently. "Perhaps I might be able to help you."

"No one can help me. No one . . . no one!"

"That's not quite true, you know. Yule and I have helped you already. We may be able to help you again."

The quiet common sense of this penetrated the girl's absorption in her own emotion.

"You have been very kind," she murmured.

"Oh, we don't want thanks," said Nanette brusquely. "You'll feel better able to face life again when you've had your breakfast. How do you like your egg boiled?"

The absolute banality of the question in comparison with the forces that were rending her soul twitched an unexpected smile to Jessamy's lips. To be asked how one liked one's egg boiled when one was bemoaning a world in ruins, and suffering the bitterest disillusionment

a young girl could experience! As if that mattered! As if anything but her own trouble mattered! But it seemed to matter to this most matter-of-fact person, who stood quietly by the bedside awaiting an answer to her silly question.

"Three or five minutes?" asked Nanetty impatiently. She wanted to turn the girl's mind back to the trivialities of normal life again, and what could possibly be more normal than a boiled egg?

Jessamy Wyatt laughed hysterically. "I don't know. I don't care. I don't think I've eaten a boiled egg in my life."

"Would you rather have it poached, then?"

How persistent the creature was! . . . Jessamy felt half-hysterical.

"Yes. No. I really don't care."

"Then I'll poach it for you. It'll be lighter, perhaps."

"Why should you do it? Can't the cook——"

"I am the cook, alas!" Nanetty admitted with a sigh. "I am one of the painful, not the born variety. I burn my fingers in the kitchen when I would much rather be——" she was going to say "painting" when some sudden inexplicable impulse prompted her to substitute —"doing something else."

"Have you no cook, then?"

"No maid of any kind, except a char-woman, Mrs. Daylight, who comes and goes as the spirit moves her. We are rather a trial to her, I fancy. She thinks we are queer people to be living in 'a nice little 'ouse like this!' But we aren't. It's the house which is wrong, not us."

"What's wrong with it?"

"Everything," answered Nanetty with a comprehensive gesture of contempt. "Can't you see?"

"I've scarcely looked yet."

"Well, this won't get your breakfast. I'm sorry." Nanetty made a sudden exit.

When she had gone Jessamy lay back on her rather hard pillow, her mind lightly hooked to the last suggestion. . . . Of course the house was all wrong. It was a dreadful little house. It had a mean, cheap pretentiousness. . . . Yet the boots under the dressing-table were well cut, if shabby. The hair-brushes were quite good: ebony with a silver initial. She did not know that they had been Nanetty's wedding-present to Yule. The dressing-gown across the bed-rail was camel's-hair — quite a decent dressing-gown.

Suddenly the significance of the room's masculinity dawned upon her.

"This must be his room," she thought. "I wonder why they put me here. Surely they *must* have a spare room. Perhaps not, though, if they've no maid. What a poky little place!" She looked round her again. "Those appalling toilet things and pincushions must have belonged to the late wife. The other woman doesn't look pink and frilly, poor thing. How dreadful it must be to be made like that! . . . Yet it may have saved her a lot!" thought Jessamy with a deep shuddering sigh.

If only she knew what to do, where to turn, how best to burn her boats so that she should be severed completely and absolutely from her former life. She was pondering the question feverishly, her thoughts going round and round like a squirrel in a cage, when Nanetty came in with her breakfast, bringing with her, her usual atmosphere of clear common sense.

"You will be chilly without something over your shoulders."

In a moment she had fetched an old China crêpe shawl, whose white ground was gaily embroidered in impossible birds and flowers, and wrapped it round the girl.

"Now you look like a princess in a fairy-tale," she said.

Jessamy smiled wanly. It was rather an unexpected remark from the matter-of-fact person. But Nanetty

was to astonish her still further before she had done with her.

"Eat your breakfast while it's hot," she commanded. "My cousin is anxious to know how you are and if you feel really rested. He asks me to beg of you to consider this house your own for as long as it is convenient to you to honour it with your presence."

Jessamy looked up at her wonderingly.

"Is your cousin a real person or does he belong to the 'Arabian Nights?' There is more than a touch of the East in hospitality like that."

Nanetty returned her glance with a new interest added to her usual shrewdness. . . . The girl was intelligent, then, not merely the pretty, spoilt child she had imagined her.

"Yule is real enough, even if at times ——" she broke off. "I often tell him that he is an anachronism. So he is, but I wish that there were more like him."

"You've both been awfully kind to me," said Jessamy. "I don't know what I should have done ——" she cast a frightened look at her muddy silver slippers and the white marocain frock that lay on the chair near the bed.

"Don't think of that now, but finish your breakfast. You're all right here. You must have got a bad shock to make you run away like that, without money or even a change of clothing."

The girl paled and shuddered.

"Yes," she whispered. "My one thought was to get away from it all as quickly as I could."

"Poor child! . . . Yule said I wasn't to ask you any questions, so I shan't."

"Do you always do what he tells you?"

"No. Not always." Nanetty smiled whimsically. "I am obeying only in the letter now, not in the spirit, for I think that if you could bring yourself to speak of — of your cataclysm, it would probably do you good."

"Would it? . . . Could I? . . ." Jessamy looked at Nanetty with the questioning wonder of a child.

"How old are you?" asked Nanetty bluntly.

"Twenty-two."

"Not really? I thought you were about eighteen."

"I've led a very sheltered life. I have had only one big sorrow before now — my father's death." Her lips quivered. "Though I really lost him when ——"

Nanetty picked up the tray. "I'll come back in a minute. Then you can tell me as much or as little as you like."

When Nanetty returned Jessamy was sitting up in bed. A faint colour burned in her cheeks awakening her almost to loveliness. Her great eyes held appeal in their depth: her hands twisted nervously together. Nanetty saw her sudden beauty with a tinge of — was it alarm?

"If Yule only saw her now ——!" was her swift thought. On its heels came a quick sense of relief that he did not.

"You'll have to be content with an outline." said Jessamy. "I can't tell you names or details yet. I — it's awfully hard to put it into words at all."

"Tell me as much or as little as you like. I'll try to understand."

IX

Jessamy coughed nervously and began without preamble.

"My father — I loved him very dearly. We meant a lot to each other, especially during my mother's lifetime. They didn't get on very well. She was over given to good works — a hard Christian. She thought us hopelessly trivial and frivolous. Everything we did was wrong. Then — after her death — he married — Claire. She made him happy. She twisted him round her smooth

white little finger. She made me happy, too. I loved her. I trusted her — until yesterday. When my father died I — I clung to her. It seemed that we had only each other. That was over a year ago. Then — there was a man —— Oh, I can't go on!" The girl broke off and hid a burning face behind hands that shook.

Nanetty, after a moment, drew a chair closer to the bed. She could not stare aloofly at the girl's misery. She had to offer her at least the comfort of a friendly human contact. She slipped an arm round the trembling shoulders.

"I see that he hurt you somehow," she said gently. "Don't go on if you'd rather not."

"But I must — I must now," cried Jessamy wildly. "You'll be thinking all sorts of things ——" She grasped and held one of Nanetty's hands in both hers. "Let me hold your hand while I tell you. It'll be easier that way."

Nanetty took her arm away and held out her other hand. "Hold both," she said. "Hold on as if to a life-buoy. I'm giving you all I can of myself."

For a moment Jessamy was silent, clutching with feverish fingers at Nanetty's cool thin hands. It was as if their hot fragility drank strength and calmness from the older woman's close clasp.

"He — was a friend of Claire's. He had come to the house sometimes before Daddy died. Afterwards he came much oftener. He was a good deal older than I, but very handsome, very fascinating. I — he — we — fell in love. At least, I thought he did. . . . I know I did. I — I — can't tell you how I loved him — how desperately — how —— Oh, you wouldn't understand!"

Nanetty's clasp slackened, then tightened again.

"No?" she queried dryly.

Why should all other women assume that because she was short and crooked of shoulder she must necessarily be devoid of a woman's heart and capacity for love and

suffering? Her lips twisted behind Jessamy's bent head. What did this child, who thought (in all the ignorant arrogance of her youth) that she knew everything, know of real love? Her puny childish passion was not love, it was probably a mere passing sex attraction, nothing more.

The girl went on incoherently.

"To love some one so that it hurts——"

Nanetty started. . . . "So that it hurts?" . . . Perhaps she did know something after all.

"So that it hurts," Jessamy continued feverishly. "To feel that an hour without him is like a year, a whole day without seeing him an immense empty desert: only the moments he is with you swift-winged, enchanted. When he asked me to marry him the whole world seemed wrapped in a rainbow. . . . Now it's grey and black and hideous."

"Why?"

"Because — because——" Jessamy choked, gulped and clutched Nanetty's hands tighter. "Yesterday he was coming to dinner. I dressed early so as to lose no moment of him. . . . He was in the drawing-room talking to Claire. They didn't see me as I pushed the door open. They were absorbed in what they were saying. . . . I — he — it was too dreadful. . . . He — had been Claire's lover. . . . She — didn't want to marry him herself. She loses her money if she marries again. . . . I was just — a cat's-paw. My money — Daddy made such a queer will. I have my mother's three hundred a year in any case. I was to have a thousand a year more if I married with Claire's consent. If I married without it before I was twenty-five the money was to be hers until she re-married. Then it was either to come back to me or go to some hospital. I forget the details. It was all so involved. The gist of it is that Daddy left me in Claire's hands until I was twenty-five. He — trusted her implicitly. So did I. Until yes-

terday. . . . I — I — it seems impossible. But it's not. It's true . . . it's hideously true. . . . I heard it all. I can hear Claire's low laugh now. . . . 'The child will make you an excellent wife. She's wax still, and she adores you.' Oh! I did! I did. And now I feel humiliated, shamed, soiled. . . ." She put a burning forehead down on the clasped hands and shivered.

"Nonsense!" said Nanetty with a brusqueness that hid a queer tangle of feelings. "You've done nothing dirty. They can't soil you. You can only soil yourself. It's not what they do to you that matters ——"

"Oh, but it does. It does. They've torn up my life by the roots. They've spoilt everything. I don't know what to do. Where to go."

"You are absolutely independent of them."

"How?"

"Haven't you three hundred a year of your own?"

"Oh, but I couldn't live on that, could I?" Jessamy opened big eyes of astonishment.

"Many people bring up large families on less."

"But I've never done any work. I shouldn't know how to be practical or economical," said Jessamy helplessly.

Nanetty checked an exclamation. She wanted to berate the girl as a parasite, a drone . . . but how could one be harsh to a drone who looked at you with great wistful eyes or a parasite who clung to you with desperate young hands?

"Time you learned," was all she said.

"I know. I know," cried Jessamy deprecatingly. "But I've never had to. I've always had people to do things for me, to make things easy and pleasant. It isn't my fault, really."

"Not altogether, I suppose. It's more the fault of the silly system you've been brought up on ——"

"Oh, don't scold me, I can't bear it!" Jessamy turned and burrowed her head into the pillows like a child,

while a big tear trickled over the round cheek nearest Nanetty. "I — I thought you'd have been sorry for me."

"But I am sorry for you. Tremendously sorry for you," Nanetty hastened to say. "It must have been a terrible shock for you to find that the two people you trusted most had deceived you. Nothing in the world could have been more bitter than that. But are you quite sure that you're right about what you've told me? You're making a very grave accusation, remember. Could you have made a mistake, misunderstood ——?"

"There was no possibility of misunderstanding," interrupted Jessamy. "I heard them — oh, I can't bear to think of it. . . . I don't want ever to see either of them again. . . . I — I believe I am afraid of Claire. She is one of those big, fair, smooth women, with silky manners and white skin and pale gold hair. She could make you believe almost anything, even against your will. I — I *know* now that I am afraid of her. I — I want to burn my boats, to make it impossible ever to see her or have anything to do with her again. Can't you help me?"

"I don't quite see how at present." Nanetty frowned, puzzled. "Perhaps later on I may have an inspiration."

"I feel that I want to slam every door between them and me," cried Jessamy passionately.

"The worst of slammed doors is that they sometimes jam," Nanetty reminded her. "If you want to open them later on, you may not be able to."

"I shan't want to open them ever again."

"You can't be sure of that."

"But I am; quite, quite sure," cried the girl childishly.

Nanetty rose. . . . "A hot person and a cold person can't possibly argue on equal terms on the same subject," she thought. "Her vision is too clouded, mine,

perhaps, too clear, to see this thing in its true perspective yet."

Jessamy felt the slight chill of the other's inevitable detachment.

"There's such a gulf between us!" she sighed inwardly. Then, with a conscious generosity, she thought: "After all, how can middle-age possibly understand what only youth can know?" Aloud she said: "Would you please turn on my bath before you go downstairs? I'd like to get up."

Nanetty swung round and covered her with a strange look, half inquiry, half unacknowledged regret. The moment of their brief rapport was gone. Vaguely she felt as if she had lost something, as if something almost within reach had spread iridescent wings and fled. Jessamy could not have guessed anything of this from the matter-of-fact response.

"Do you take a cold bath?"

Jessamy shuddered. "Oh, no. I like a nice warm one, please."

"Then I'm afraid you can't have it, for the kitchen range isn't lighted today.

Jessamy's fine brows drew together in a pretty puzzled frown. "But what has that to do with it?" It seemed absurd that one couldn't have as much hot water as one wanted merely by turning a tap. It had never occurred to her to think how such an ordinary necessity was obtained.

"Merely everything," Nanetty answered with a queer little smile. "If the kitchen range isn't lighted there can be no hot water. It doesn't matter to Yule or me. We always take cold baths."

"How Spartan!" shivered Jessamy.

"You'd better rest for a while."

"No. I'd rather not, please. I really want to get up."

"But what are you going to do when you are up?"

"I don't know."

"And what are you going to wear?" Nanetty pursued. "You can't go about in the daytime in that." She glanced at the silver-girdled frock on the chair.

"No, of course not." Jessamy looked rather as if she were going to cry again.

Something pricked Nanetty. She knew that she was not being as nice as she might be to this waif from an alien world. She knew that Yule would have insisted on lighting the kitchen range immediately his guest expressed the faintest desire for a warm bath. She knew also, with a hot searing pang, how dangerous even to an ordinary man's peace of mind this young and helpless loveliness might be, but to a man of Yule's chivalrous, romantic temperament, how positive a menace! . . . Well, she couldn't help that. "But I can help failing him now," she thought. She came a step nearer to the bed and spoke quickly. "I'll light the fire as soon as I go down. I'll let you know when the water is hot enough for a bath.

"Oh, thanks. I really must have one." Jessamy saw no concession, nothing but ordinary courtesy.

"I can lend you my best dress. It will be too short, of course ——"

"Oh, but I couldn't possibly wear any one else's best dress." The mere thought was distasteful. Jessamy had made a study of clothes, and she was intensely fastidious.

"There's one of my cretonne overalls, then. Mrs. Daylight washed it on Monday."

"That will do beautifully, thanks."

When Nanetty had gone Jessamy lay back upon her pillows once more, pondering again how best she might burn her boats, or slam her doors.

It was not until she lay in the ugly narrow bath from which most of its imitation marble paint had been rubbed away that her inspiration came.

X

At sound of Nanetty's step on the stairs Yule darted out into the hall.

"Well?" he said eagerly.

"Well?" echoed Nanetty with a sudden gust of annoyance at his eagerness.

"How is she? How does she look? How did she sleep? Is she more rested, happier?"

"Your foundling is sitting up and taking notice," answered Nanetty dryly. "She has eaten an excellent breakfast and now demands a hot bath ——"

"She can have one whenever she likes. I lit the range while you were upstairs — and the deuce of a job I had too — but I thought she'd like one."

"You thought quite right." Nanetty strove for a return to friendly normality.

"You didn't bother her with questions, I hope, or tell her that we were moving or hint in any way that it was inconvenient for us to have her?"

"No. And let me reassure you on the latter point, Yule. It will never occur to her that it could be inconvenient for any one to have her anywhere. She takes everything for granted. The world is — not exactly her oyster — but her footstool and her umbrella, her man-servant and her maid-servant. In a word, she is, or has been, thoroughly spoilt."

"Why do you say has been? Has she told you anything about herself?"

"A good deal more than she imagines," returned Nanetty in the same dry tone. "I'd better tell you, too, Yule. It will save the necessity of further explanations."

"Do you think she would like me to know?"

"Don't you want to hear?"

"More than anything in the world, but ——"

"I don't think you need have any scruples. She did not ask for secrecy. I think you'd better know."

"Very well."

In a few vivid words Nanetty outlined for him the story Jessamy had told her. She saw him react to each phase of it as the stillness of a pool reacts to gusts and tremors of a fitful breeze. When she had finished he was striding about the kitchen, hot, indignant.

"The cad! The blackguard! I'd like to horse-whip him! I will, too, if she'll only let me. The poor child! Poor little desolate thing! Of course she mustn't go back to those people. Of course she must stay with us as long as ever she wishes. She has sought sanctuary here. We'll never give her up to those brutes. The woman's just as bad. . . . And if she's afraid. . . . Oh, Nanetty, heaven bless the moon that made me want to be a prairie-dog last night! Just imagine what might have happened if some one else had found her!"

Nanetty sank on a chair, half laughing, half remonstrant.

"Dear old boy, do be sensible. Set your wits to work and think out some feasible plan for Miss Wyatt. We can't really be responsible for her, you know."

"Why not?" cried Yule warmly.

"Every why."

"We're not going to turn her out into the street again, if you mean that."

"Certainly not. But there are all sorts of ordinary things to be thought of. She must have clothes, toilet accessories, money ——"

"Couldn't we ——"

"She has plenty of money of her own, and a rather extensive wardrobe, I imagine. Her undergarments are of silk, Yule. She strikes me as being a decidedly expensive young person."

"Well, what of that? You have a sordid mind, Nanetty."

"Probably. Your waif ——" Nanetty stopped and bit her lip. The last thing she desired was to foster any

idea of ownership in Yule, and here she was, actively thrusting it upon him at every turn!

Yule smiled. His face softened to a sudden tenderness.

"Well, she does seem to belong to me more than to any one else just at present," he murmured happily.

"Go out and buy something for her dinner, then," snapped Nanetty. "There's nothing in the house. I meant to have a meal in Chelsea."

"What shall I get?"

"What you're always wanting — a slice of the moon!" said Nanetty . . . but she tried to smile at him as she said it.

XI

Yule Amber opened the door with difficulty. He had a lightly-papered cold roast chicken under one arm, a long crusty loaf of French bread under the other, a bottle of white wine sticking out of his left pocket, three large pears bulging from his right. From a paper bag in his hand peeped a bunch of pink and white radishes, a head of lettuce and some tomatoes.

He closed the hall-door behind him with his foot and strode into the kitchen.

"There, Nanetty!" he exclaimed, dumping his purchases on the table and looking at her with pride.

Nanetty turned from the range, over which she had been bending, her cheeks hot from the fire.

"I thought you weren't going to do any cooking," he said.

"It seemed a pity to waste the good fire," she returned, pushing her hair out of her eyes. "So I'm making some soup for supper and baking a few scones for tea. I say, what a spread you've got!"

"I thought it was the occasion for a feast," said Yule, smiling —"Chicken, wine, fruit, a salad. She would want a little treat after her experiences, poor child."

"If you wanted to give her a treat you'd better have got ortolans and peaches," said Nanetty crossly. "You *won't* understand, Yule." Then she melted at the look of disappointment that flickered across his face. "It'll be a treat for me, anyhow, and a little meal that any one might enjoy. Will you make the salad? You're much better at it than I am."

"Right."

"The oil and vinegar and things are in the dining-room. There's a glass bowl in that cupboard."

"Right," said Yule again, gathering up his materials. His voice was quiet and toneless.

Nanetty looked after him as he went. It seemed as if some spring had gone out of his step. Why had she been so sharp with him? Why had she spoiled his innocent pleasure in the little feast he had prepared? She wanted to run after him and tell him she was sorry, but that would have been too silly, too childish, making too much of it. Besides, behind her sharpness was a lurking fear, intangible so far, unformulated, unacknowledged: yet definite enough, and likely to grow in intensity. What was it that made her want to cover Yule as with wings? Was it only the eternal mother-impulse, no more? And from what did she want to protect him? The wiles of that girl upstairs?

Nanetty looked out on the paved back-yard with eyes that did not see the ballooning garments on the clothes-line or the soot-blackened edge of the shed.

Was that a real menace or only an imaginary one? Genuine passion had rung in the girl's tone as she spoke of the man she loved. . . . But hearts had been caught on the rebound: with the creating of a vacuum came also the need to have it filled. Tags of general wisdom flicked at Nanetty, stinging her.

"Twenty-four hours ago I was happy, and I didn't know it," she mused. "Now . . . perhaps I am tormenting myself unnecessarily. But —— Every one

doesn't see Yule with my eyes. But I swear before God"— she clenched her hands with sudden passion — "that I'm not thinking of myself in this. I'm thinking only of him. I don't want him to be hurt again. I don't ——"

"Where did you say the Tarragon vinegar was? I can't find it in the dining-room," said Yule's anxious voice behind her.

After a scarcely perceptible pause, during which Nanetty got a grip of herself again, she swung round to face him. He smiled at her.

"I'm awfully stupid, I'm afraid," he said.

"No, you're not. My fault entirely. The vinegar's on the pantry shelf. I forgot I put it there the other day." It was she who was stupid to torment herself unnecessarily like this. She was seeing all sorts of ridiculous possibilities in the mere fact of their giving shelter to a strange girl for a day or two. When Jessamy Wyatt left them she would slip out of their lives as suddenly as she slipped into them, leaving no more definite mark upon them than the stone upon the water of the pool into which it has been flung.

"But what of the circles on the surface?" cried Nanetty's inner fear. "Who shall say where they may end? . . . Oh, don't be a morbid idiot!" she chid herself. "Heavens, the soup is boiling over!" She ran over to the range, the Martha in her for the moment ousting the Thomas, and took the saucepan off the fire. As she did so, the salient scenes from Jessamy Wyatt's story flashed vividly before her mental vision.

The fair smooth woman and the tall dark man (she felt that he must be dark — probably rather Jewish-looking) whispering together by the fire-place. The girl standing frozen in the doorway, staring, her face mirroring the shock, her dismay, her sudden need for flight. She saw the flight too, the mad rush through the hall, with no more delay than to snatch up a fur coat and pull it on,

the aimless hurry through suburb and street, the fevered wanderings with no end in sight.

Her heart melted within her as she thought of what might have happened to the girl, had she fallen into different hands. Then she stiffened again.

"I'm thinking in terms of the cinema," she told herself. "The whole thing is more like a film-story than anything that could actually happen to real living people. The innocent eavesdropper, the villainess, the plot, the flight, the rescue! . . . We shall see it all at the Electric Theatre next week! . . . But why couldn't it have happened to some one who appreciates what people *will* call 'the pictures'? Why should it happen to us just as things were becoming easier at last? Why couldn't it have waited until we had gone to that dear crowded old house in Caroline Place? . . . Why, why, why? . . . The eternal question! But I *am* my brother's keeper, and we *are* responsible for her now, and I've just got to grin and bear it. . . . Lord, it's well my teeth are good! I've had a fair share of 'grinning' to do in my time!"

XII

As Yule left the kitchen, vinegar-bottle in hand, the sound of footsteps on the stairs made him pause in the hall. He waited, looking upward expectantly.

Slow steps they were, hesitant, even reluctant. Yet as they grudgingly approached Yule had the odd fancy that they were treading deeper and deeper into his heart.

The stairs creaked louder: there was a flash of apple-green through the bannisters. Jessamy had turned the corner and, peering downwards, had seen him. She stopped.

"How am I to face another of them?" she thought with a dull dismay. "Oh, these strangers!"

Forgotten was her hysterical outburst of last night at

Nanetty's kindness. That little oasis of feeling was completely buried beneath the fine dry sand of to-day's common sense appraisal of her plight.

Yule caught hold of the bannisters and looked up through them.

In his visions of the night he had seen a lovely distraught princess, silk-clad, silver-shod. He had never for a moment pictured the hesitant, half-frightened child who stood at the turn of the staircase. Her borrowed raiment, gaily patterned with impossible birds and fruit, just reached below her knees, looking like a child's overall. The wavy masses of her dark hair and the great bewildered, shadowed eyes made her face look strangely small. The rounded chin was cleft by a dimple, the soft lips set in curves of appeal.

All Yule's chivalry burned within him as a purifying fire at the sight, touching manhood and knighthood alike as it did. How could any one have betrayed the trust of this lovely wistfulness? How could any man have found it in his heart to use this child ill?

Nothing of this sudden surge of feeling was apparent in his greeting, unless perhaps some wave of sympathy radiated from him to her, touching her with its friendly warmth, as a warm gust of air may touch one's cheek in passing through a wood.

"Good morning. I hope you are rested," he said, smiling. "You are just in time to help me to make a salad."

"Am I?" She smiled back, with a swift ease of mind.

In this man's thin, plain face and glowing eyes she read nothing but kindliness, appreciation. Whatever she did or did not do would find equal favour in his sight. This was no stranger. It was the human embodiment of that hand stretched out to her in the darkness, of whose strength and kindly warmth she was again suddenly conscious.

"I'm afraid I shan't be of much use," she admitted deprecatingly. "I never made a salad in my life."

In the world she came from salads had always appeared ready made. Some one must have prepared them, of course, but she had never thought about it. In this queer new world into which she had tumbled so suddenly people had to do everything for themselves. Nothing happened fortuitously. You saw the working of the machinery: you heard its cumbrous creaking.

"Come and watch me, then," Yule suggested comfortably. "You'll be able to do it yourself next time."

Jessamy caught her breath. No matter how he tried Yule Amber could not have said anything more reassuring. In the absolute disintegration of her present it suggested a continuity, a stability, something for her groping, broken tendrils to cling to. "Next time" . . . the simple phrase sounded surpassingly sweet to the weary over-strained girl.

She passed before him into the dining-room, which appeared both shabbier and more garish by day than by night, and sat down in one of the armchairs.

"How do you make salads?" she began: then, snatched back by memory of her own trouble from the trivialities of the moment she cried, almost as if against her will, "Oh, what do these things matter? I'm half distracted, wondering what to do. I don't know where to turn."

"Why turn anywhere for the present?" said Yule in a tone which he tried to keep calm and friendly.

"I can't quarter myself indefinitely on you."

"Why not? Aren't you comfortable here?"

"It isn't that."

"What is it, then?" queried Yule, apparently absorbed in his salad-making.

His heart was thudding so loudly that he wondered she did not hear it. He did not realize that the strength of her present self-absorption was as adamant about her

senses: that her disclaimer came more from politeness than conviction.

"It's — it's — oh, I can't tell it all over again," Jessamy cried, twisting her hands. "It hurts. It almost kills me ——"

She turned away her face so that only an ivory curve of her cheek showed against the red wall-paper.

"You needn't. I know."

She turned again swiftly. "You know?" Her wild brown eyes stilled to a momentary relief.

"Yes. Nanetty told me. I hope you don't mind?" Yule said anxiously.

Jessamy looked at him. In his eyes she saw kindness, comprehension, a desire to shelter. This touched the only part of her that could be reached at the moment: the only part that was conscious of any special need.

"No, I don't mind. I had rather you knew, in spite of ——" Her voice choked.

Yule pushed aside the salad-bowl and came and stood beside her, his face working, his words incoherent.

"Look here, you'll tell me that fellow's name, won't you? . . . You'll let me go and give him the thrashing he deserves. You haven't a man of your own to do it for you. Let me be your man. . . . You will, won't you? . . . I *am* your man, whether you know it or not. . . . Your servant, ready to serve you."

Numbed as Jessamy's senses were by her recent shock, Yule's outburst yet found a chink by which to enter: here was the homage, the adulation to which she had been used for the greater part of her young life. The only and adored child of a well-to-do man, something of an heiress in her own way, daily incense had been swung before her and the scent of it was sweet in her nostrils. The accustomed whiff rose pleasantly. She did not guess how deep was the censer from which it came.

"You are good. You are kind," she faltered.

"You'll let me horsewhip the cur, won't you?"

For an instant the flash of primitive womanhood sparkled in her eyes at the thought of men's combat. Then it died away as she shook her head.

"No. I don't want to have anything more to do with them. . . . Besides, you couldn't."

"Why not?"

"He — is much bigger than you are."

"It is the spirit rather than the flesh which counts in these things."

"Not if it came to a question of your horsewhipping him!" The ghost of a smile flickered round Jessamy's lips at the thought. She shook her head again. "It's not a case for physical force. I don't want ever to see them, ever to hear of them again. I want to burn my boats so that I can't go back. I want to slam every door between us." She repeated her metaphor with childish emphasis as if the mere saying of the words would give them form and substance. "How am I to do this?"

"Could you take a little flat ——"

"I couldn't possibly live alone, and I haven't enough money to pay any one to live with me, even if there was any one whom I could bear to have about me always."

"You can stay with us, you know, as long as you like."

Jessamy looked round her disdainfully. "I'm sorry, but I don't think I could endure living in a house like this, either."

"Of course you couldn't," Yule exclaimed eagerly. "It's an utterly detestable house in every way. But we're leaving it in a day or two. An old cousin of mine has left me a queer little house in Chelsea and we're going to move in on — as soon as we're ready." He changed his sentence cleverly lest she should be embarrassed.

"Oh!" said Jessamy. . . . A house in Chelsea? That sounded better. "I don't know Chelsea at all. I thought only artists lived there."

"It's only Chelsea by courtesy, really," Yule ex-

plained. "It's on the Westminster end of the Embankment. Besides, we *are* artists, after a fashion. Nanetty paints and I draw — just ridiculous things, you know. But I've had a sketch in the 'Bystander,' and I've designed a few book plates and things like that. Do you ——"

"I don't do anything, I'm afraid. I can sing a little, and I can dance — just modern ball-room dances, but that's about all."

"No hope of a career there, I'm afraid."

"But I don't want a career. I just want to live — quietly if I must — but happily in any case, if I can."

Yule smiled whimsically. It was a smile that lay more in his eyes than his lips.

"Now you're asking all the gifts of the gods," he said.

"Am I?" returned the girl listlessly. "But Claire would be sure to find me out. She'd persuade me that I was mistaken. She's awfully plausible. She'd make me go back, and I don't want to go. . . . Oh, I don't want to! . . . Everything's broken, tarnished, soiled." She twisted her hands in a sudden accession of nervousness.

"Poor little girl," said Yule gently, at a loss how to help her. "But you must get into touch with some one who knows you. Haven't you any close friend ——"

"All my friends are Claire's."

"Is there no one — a clergyman, a banker, a solicitor ——"

"Ah, there's Mr. Heppel, of course."

"Who is he?"

"Daddy's solicitor. I had forgotten all about him. He manages my business affairs and looks after my money for me."

Yule felt relieved. "We'll go to him immediately after dinner."

"But won't that be too late? Couldn't we go sooner?" asked Jessamy anxiously.

"Sooner?" echoed Yule. "We dine at half-past one —— Oh, you'd call it lunch, of course. . . . Unless you'd like to 'phone to him."

"No. I must see him to explain things properly."

"He can 'phone to your stepmother to send along your clothes and things," suggested Yule, feeling eminently practical.

"But not here. Not here. She mustn't know where I am," cried Jessamy wildly.

"No, no, not here, but to Mr. Heppel's office. He can send them direct to Radnor Crescent then, and you'll have them to-night."

"Yes. Fletcher will pack what I want, and I can send for my other things later when I have settled what I am going to do. . . . I can't bear not having my own clothes. . . . I'm afraid I'll have to ask your cousin to lend me some shoes and a hat, though. My fur coat will cover all other deficiencies."

"Nanetty will lend you anything in the world," Yule assured her.

Jessamy stuck out feet cased in blue-felt bedroom slippers, and regarded them dubiously. She felt apprehensively certain of the dowdiness of her benefactress's foot-gear.

"You'll get a taxi, then, the instant after lunch — dinner, I mean."

"Certainly," said Yule, though the thought of a taxi had not hitherto occurred to him.

Jessamy looked at her feet again and gave a little sigh. Dowdiness was to her, so far, one of the unforgiveable sins. But she need not have had such qualms. Nanetty's feet were, after her hair, her only other personal vanity, and she always saw that they went well, if not exactly smartly shod.

"Extremes meet," she had decided long ago. "If one's hair is properly brushed and dressed and one's feet decently clad, it doesn't matter so much what goes in

between." Thus she pushed her crooked shoulder into the background. "It needn't warp one's mind even if it does warp one's body," she told herself.

XIII

JESSAMY WYATT came out of Mr. Heppel's office in Gray's Inn with two bright spots flaming in her cheeks.

Amber, who had waited outside for her, hastened to meet her.

"Well?" he said expectantly. "Had a satisfactory interview?"

She almost ran to him, as one runs to a street island for safety from the converging traffic, so safe he seemed, so secure an oasis in the conflicting whirl of her life.

"Yes and no," she gasped, her breath coming quickly as if she had been running. "Is there any quiet place near where we could sit and talk?"

"The Temple Gardens are quite close. Do you think you could walk as far as that?"

"Yes. Yes. Let us go. Which way?"

"This way." He turned in the direction of the Gardens.

Their footsteps echoed on the flagged passages. The tall old houses leaned above them, shutting out all but a blue strip of sky, hemming the human atoms in with their brooding hints of the secrets they knew, the tragedies and comedies which they could disclose if they would.

Once hurrying past a dark doorway, Jessamy turned her ankle on a crooked flag-stone, and caught at Yule's arm to keep herself from falling. His heart leaped at her touch. He had the same sensation as last night of a sudden cold emptiness when she took her hand away again.

She spoke only once during their hurried walk.

"I don't feel safe," she cried in a distracted tone that

tugged at Yule's heart-strings. "Oh, I don't feel safe."

It was a typical early March day: white clouds driven across the heavenly fields of blue by a boisterous shepherd-wind, that raised eddies of dust on earth and set stray papers dancing with a dervish madness.

There were few people in the gardens at that hour. An empty seat was easily found. Jessamy sank on it wearily, leaning back, then leaning forward again as if unable to rest.

"Why don't you feel safe?" Yule asked gently. It was torture to him to see her fear, her agitation.

Jessamy faced him with a wild look. "Because —— Because —— Oh, Mr. Heppel didn't understand. He insisted that I must be making a mistake, that I must have misunderstood. . . . You see, Claire had got him first. . . . She 'phoned to him early this morning about me. . . . He was very stern. He blamed me, thought I had behaved very badly. . . . He said that Claire was distracted about me, that he must reassure her at once as to my safety."

"Well, there's no harm in that," said Yule, as she paused for breath.

"But there is . . . there is. You don't know Claire. I do. She'd get you, too, if she tried. She'd twist you ——"

"No, she wouldn't. I'm *your* man."

Jessamy shook her head. "You don't know her," she said again. "I did make Mr. Heppel promise that he wouldn't tell her where I was staying. He conceded that at last — reluctantly, I must say. He'll keep his word — yet still I don't feel safe. Claire will find me out somehow. I know she will. Then she'll make me go back, persuade me that I was mistaken, and perhaps — he —— Oh, I can't! I can't!" She covered her face with her hands for a moment and shrank, shuddering against the hard wooden seat.

"How I wish I could help you," breathed Yule.

He looked for inspiration at the disconsolate garden, with its black mould pierced by thrusts of pale-green iris-spears and brightened here and there by the broken gold of belated crocuses. Sparrows clustered thick as fruit on the bare boughs above them: a strange brown winter fruit that suddenly took to itself wings and deserted the blackened branches to hop about their feet in search of friendly crumbs.

"I'd do anything in the world for you," said Yule to the busy expectant sparrows, his hands tightly clasped between his knees. "That sounds trite, I know, but it's the absolute, literal truth."

"Is it?" Jessamy spoke in a whisper. "Do you really mean it?" She gazed searchingly at him, a spark of hope in her great wild eyes.

"On my honour. Just try me and see if there is anything I wouldn't do for you."

"I wonder. . . . Oh, I wonder! . . ." Jessamy caught her breath, and looked at him again with that searching half-frightened appeal.

"How can I convince you how desperately in earnest I am?"

"You'll think me extraordinary."

"No, I shan't. I'll understand."

"Oh, will you? Will you? . . . People say that, you know, and then they don't, and it's dreadful."

"Just try me," said Yule once more, holding his breath for what was coming, his face transfigured with some inner radiance. . . . Oh, if only she would trust him, use him! That would indeed be his accolade.

At last Jessamy took the plunge. Her words tumbled over each other incoherently.

"It's a way out, a door to slam which they could never open. I am of age, you know. In one sense I am free to do as I like. If I marry without Claire's consent before I am twenty-five she would get my thousand a year. . . . That would please her. She loves money,

or rather the power that money brings. . . . Oh, how is it that I see all that so clearly now? She must have tied a bandage over my eyes before."

"If you marry? . . ." said Yule in a strange voice.

"Yes, if I marry," Jessamy answered in the same high, excited tones, glancing at him and away again. "It is the only thing I can think of that would keep her away from me. She would have no more power over me then. She couldn't touch a married woman. . . . I thought it all out this morning. . . . It's a mad idea, of course . . . utterly foolish and impossible . . . only — only ——" she broke off in a flame of embarrassment.

Yule bent over her and took the nervously beating hands in his, his own heart thudding with excitement.

"Do you really mean that you would let me do this for you? That you would let me give you the shelter of my name? Let me stand between you and the world? My dear, my dear, do you really mean this?" His voice rang.

Jessamy shrank a little from his fervency, but left her hands in his. There was comfort in his warm clasp.

"Is that the way you look at it?" she asked very low.

"Of course it's the way I look at it," he cried, joyously. "It's the way any man would look at it."

"Oh, no, no. . . . For I've nothing to give. Please understand that. I gave all that was in me to — that other, who flung it into the gutter."

"Don't think of that now."

"But I must think of it. We must get things clear. There must be no mistakes, no misunderstandings. It's — just a bargain between us. . . . You offered to help me. . . . That's the only way I can think of. It isn't as if. . . . You know that there can be no pretence of love between us. . . . I ——! And you?

. . . You are a widower. . . . Your heart is in a grave, isn't it?"

"No," answered Yule bluntly.

"Oh!" she looked up, startled.

"My — my marriage was a mistake. It wasn't — a real marriage," said Yule with difficulty. "Real marriage, like the Kingdom of Heaven, is within one. It's not dependent on forms or ceremonies. It — mine — wasn't that sort of marriage."

"Neither would this one be," put in Jessamy quickly. "It — well, it's just a way of escape for me. For you — it's simply being taken at your word. You were rash enough to say ——"

"What I meant unalterably," Yule assured her.

"Very well, then," Jessamy's face flamed with what must still be said. "I — haven't had much experience, but I'm not a child, you know. I quite understand that there are certain aspects — certain obligations. . . . I — I could pay — in one way — for my bargain — if you wished . . . though without love, I think it would be disgusting," she ended in a burst of frightened candor.

"So do I," said Yule, his face as hot as her own. "Don't let us talk of bargains. There can be none between you and me. You honour me by letting me help you. I shan't ask you for anything more than you will want to give me — ever. Remember that. I am your man. I put my hands under your feet, as the Spanish say. My highest honour and duty is to serve you, now and always. Remember that, too."

He pressed her ungloved hands reassuringly, longing to pour through their mutual contact something of the love, the confidence, the exultance that filled him. Then he bent and kissed the hot, clinging fingers. Her lightest touch thrilled him. The sense of her trust in him wrapped the whole world in a sudden golden glamour. The wonder

of it, the magic! . . . If only he were really worthy, but who could be, of such lovely trustful innocence?

For a moment the path he had to tread flashed as in a vision before him. It was the way of the "veray, gentil, parfit knight," to which he had so impulsively vowed himself. He saw the solitary vigil, the stony path beset with thorns and dangers, the bitter-sweet of daily temptation, the rigour of night with the drawn sword ever between them. . . . Aye, the sword, maybe, but above, the splendour of the stars. . . . Could he do it? . . .

He drew a long breath. In that instant of vision he was truly rapt away from earth.

Jessamy gave a quick little gasp as she looked at him. There was something in his face which she had never seen before in mortal face, something which touched her all at once to a sense of the finer issues, the larger human complications in this course of action which she had been planning so lightly. Some sense of fatality seized her, some swift apprehension of the irrevocably closed door. She sighed again, but the momentary fear evaporated as quickly as it had come as she looked at Yule once more. Surely, nothing base, nothing mean had harbourage behind that kind plain face with its steady grey eyes and untidy reddish hair. Yule Amber had been gentleness, chivalry itself ever since their first meeting — was it only last night? Æons of growth, of experience seemed to have passed over Jessamy's head in these few fateful hours.

"You will be kind to me?" she murmured.

"Kind?" Yule came back to her slowly, with a dazed glory in his eyes. He laughed. "Kind! What a poor, pitiful, inadequate little word! A paltry little word, and yet — the thing it represents is one of the big things in life, one of the things that really matter. . . . Yes, I think I may safely promise to be kind to you." He laughed again at the sheer ridiculousness of such a request.

"You're asking nothing of me," Jessamy whispered, shamefacedly.

"I am asking a great deal. I am asking you to trust me. You do, don't you?"

"If I didn't, how could I ——?" A wan smile completed the ellipsis.

"God helping me, you will never regret it," he vowed.

"No," said Jessamy. "No." Her breath came pantingly. "Don't let us be so solemn," she begged. "I — I really can't bear to have you so solemn."

"I won't be solemn any longer," he promised her, his eyes shining. "Let's talk of ways and means."

"Can — it — be soon?"

"Yes, I fancy so."

"To-morrow? The next day?"

"I believe so — at a Registrar's. I must inquire. I never ——"

"Let's go and see about it at once," Jessamy jumped up. "I shan't feel really safe until it's all over."

Yule rose too. "We'll get a taxi on the Embankment. I'll take you home first and then ——"

"Oh, no, no. Don't leave me. Take me with you."

"Right."

"Need we — need we — tell your cousin until it's safely over?" thrust Jessamy tentatively.

All at once Yule tumbled from the clouds. It was a most extraordinary thing, but he had completely forgotten Nanetty!

Nanetty!

How on earth would she take it? She would call him mad, a fool, worse. She would turn the staring searchlight of her common sense on his iris-winged romance, exposing its every weakness, its pitiful inadaptability to the coarse-fingered working-day world, its splendid folly and disregard of consequences.

An almost uncontrollable desire seized him to fall in with Jessamy's obvious wish and keep Nanetty in ignor-

ance of what they purposed doing until the deed was done. It would be easier, certainly. Nanetty knew, none better, that it was waste of breath to rail at the inevitable: but Yule felt that she would not spare him for anything less.

To make it irrevocable: the temptation gripped him, held him, shook him. The easy way, the coward's way lay plain before him. He had only to hold his tongue until the intervening hours were over, then silence all possible protest by confronting Nanetty with the inevitable. But was that the way of the " veray gentil, parfit knight"? Did Nanetty deserve such treatment of him, to whom she had been always so staunch, so splendid a friend? Every link of the chain of memories which bound them together shot sparks of protest against the thought.

No. Yule Amber was strong enough to take this blind leap into the dark at another woman's request, but he was not strong enough to hurt Nanetty, his dear old Nanetty.

" I'm afraid we must," he answered, some of the fire gone from his tone. " We can't do this without telling Nanetty."

In his inmost soul he knew that it would be difficult telling, but he was not going to begin his new life by trampling on the dear and beautiful things of the old one.

XV

The gas-fire hissed in the dining-room grate, sucking up much of the air's freshness in the little room, although the window stood wide open. The incandescent light near the mantelpiece bubbled and flickered irritatingly within its red glass globe.

Yule got up and fiddled with it, and for a moment it became quieter: then it broke out into its loud plop-plop-plop again.

"Damn the thing!" he exclaimed.

"Why don't you light up?" asked Nanetty, looking up from the sock she was darning. "Your best-beloved briar is on the chimney-piece near you."

"Good idea," said Yule, reaching for it and stuffing the bowl with the Virginian mixture he always smoked.

During this little commonplace ritual Nanetty glanced at him again. Jessamy Wyatt had gone to bed immediately after supper in a room newly feminized by Nanetty, who, during their absence in the afternoon, had removed all visible traces of Yule's previous occupancy, put fresh linen on the bed, and tentatively lent Jessamy a portion of her own scanty wardrobe.

The scene in its simple domesticity was the replica of a hundred others, yet the essence, the spirit which had made the homely happiness of those others was entirely lacking in this. Something had gone — only momentarily, Nanetty hoped.

But if change once breaks in upon routine, can things ever be quite the same again? . . . The coming of Jessamy Wyatt, not twenty-four hours ago, seemed to have altered everything irrevocably. Would life readjust itself to its old happy channel when she went away again, Nanetty wondered? Yule's face vaguely alarmed her. She knew it so well, every line, every expression, every shade of feeling that flitted across it.

There was something in it to-night which she tried to read: a queer glow, an exaltation that heralded one of his most pronounced Quixotisms: a very unusual irritability: a deprecation towards herself, equally unwonted. He had something on his mind: something of which he feared she might not approve. . . . Well, she probably wouldn't, but she was sure to give in in the end, and aid and abet him in whatever dear folly he purposed. She generally did. She had only to wait and he would tell her everything. A tender little smile played round her lips at the thought.

Yule saw the smile and took courage from it. The thing had to be: Nanetty must be told. He could not sleep that night until she knew. She would disapprove, of course, but he would win her round eventually. She would be Jessamy's best friend as well as his. There was nothing in the world to prevent them from living happily together, all three, he thought in his masculine blindness. Jessamy — suddenly he realized how little he knew of the girl's character, temperament, ideas. Their upbringing had been totally different: their outlook would probably be from far divergent angles. A saying of his mother's came back to console him.

"No man and woman ever really know each other until they're married, no matter how long or how well they have apparently known each other beforehand."

There was more than a seed of truth in that. In an incredibly short space of time it had sprouted, grown from seedling to plant, from plant to sapling, from sapling to tree, beneath whose beneficent shade Yule could shelter happily from the beams of Nanetty's glaring searchlight.

He smiled at the thought. Nanetty caught the smile and spoke her own thought at the moment.

"You'll sleep more comfortably to-night, boy. I've made up a sort of bed for you in the study and put your things there."

"Thanks, old thing, but you shouldn't have bothered." A warmth of gratitude rose within him and radiated towards her. . . . How good Nanetty was, how thoughtful, how unselfish! There was no one like her, really. . . . . Let her go? Detestable, impossible thought! He would grapple her to him "with hooks of steel" if she ever even tried to run away. . . . To run away. . . . It was only a desperate, frightened child like Jessamy who would do a thing like that. . . . Jessamy, who had run straight into his heart the instant he had seen her. . . . No, before he had seen her

even. What was that inaudible call which had sent him hot-foot to where she crouched against the railings?

"It's not purely physical," he told himself exultantly, as if defending himself against some unseen accuser. "It's not. It's not. I loved her before I even saw her. How do you account for that?"

He pulled hard at his pipe. For an instant longer the old atmosphere pervaded the stuffy little room. The old rapport still existed between the woman who darned and the man who smoked in such simple, friendly juxtaposition. Then Nanetty shattered it for ever with a phrase: trivial, domestic, undramatic.

"What are we going to do about moving on Friday? Is Miss Wyatt to come with us?"

The moment had come. Yule swallowed hard, and shifted his pipe a little. "Yes, she's coming with us. She's coming for good. I — we — Nanetty, I'm going to marry her!"

Nanetty dropped the sock with the olive-wood darning-egg in it on her lap. She stared at Yule as if he had hit her between the eyes: as indeed he had, in a spiritual sense. She felt stunned for the moment. In her wildest imaginings she had not foreseen so fatally swift a development, though she knew now that this was the fear that had lurked in dark ambush ever since the girl's coming.

"You're not in earnest," she gasped at last, stupidly. "You can't be."

"But I am. I'm more in earnest than I've ever been in my life before. It's as if I had always been dreaming up to now, as if I were really only awake at last."

"Yule, you're mad. You're dreaming harder than ever, or am I?" She put her hand to her forehead in a bewildered fashion. She could not believe even yet that she had heard aright.

Yule was on his knees at her side, capturing the wandering hand and holding it close in his, pouring forth

his thoughts, his emotions in an incoherent flood, which was as a stream in spate compared with former trickles.

"We're not dreaming, Nanetty darling. Or if so, it's a dream from which I hope we'll never awaken. . . . She trusts me. . . . She honours me. . . . I'm not worthy. . . . No man could be. . . . Yet after her dreadful disillusionment it seems too wonderful . . . too blessedly wonderful. But I'll make it all up to her . . . if ever a man. . . . All she wants is to feel safe, to have some one between her and all that she fears. . . . If only I can — but I'll be able to, surely . . . surely. . . ."

"Stop, Yule. I want the truth. Did this girl ask you to marry her?"

"Nanetty ——"

His cry told her all that she wanted to know.

"Thanks," she said dryly. "You must be mad, I think."

"Mad? . . . No, blessedly sane."

"Infernally insane," snapped Nanetty. "Who but a madman would give in to this colossally selfish creature's desire to shelter herself behind you at the cost of your whole future life, your whole future happiness? You've been carried away by a moment of impulse ——"

"No!"

"I say yes, and I know you through and through. Better than you know yourself, perhaps. Half an hour's calm reflection would show you the absolute idiocy of this monstrous idea."

"It's not a monstrous idea. It's an inspiration."

"Nonsense, Yule. You've done enough idiotic things in your life before now, but this is, surely, the crowning folly of them all."

"It isn't. Listen, Nanetty. . . . You must listen. This — I'm not going into this thing blindly, as you imagine. I'm going into it with my eyes wide open."

Nanetty moved impatiently. "Nonsense," she said

again. Then she broke out. "The girl can't care for you."

"She doesn't pretend to. We — are to be just friends. She is to let me serve her, give her the shelter of my name and my home ——"

"A very one-sided arrangement. . . . Look here, Yule. You and I have always been frank with each other. You're a man. You've just escaped from one uncongenial marriage. Are you really determined to plunge straight into another?"

"Yes." Yule's face was white: his lips set in a firm hard line. Only his eyes still held that queer inner glow. "It — won't be uncongenial — in one sense."

"What do you mean?"

"Nanetty, do you remember what we were talking about — was it only last night?" he broke off to wonder incredulously.

Nanetty nodded. She could not speak. Her feelings choked her. How was she to save him from this madness?

"You wanted me to promise you something. You remember?"

She nodded again. The hands that Yule held quivered and were still.

"Well ——" his voice sank very low. "This — is the big thing, the real thing, Nanetty."

She started. "Oh, my God!" she cried wildly. "Then it is even worse than I thought."

"Worse?" he echoed, looking up at her with a puzzled expression.

"Yes, worse, far worse. If you care as you think you do, boy, how are you going to stand it? How long do you think you can endure giving all and getting nothing? You're only human, remember." She thrust on. She could spare him nothing now. When disaster came, as come it would, he could not say she had not warned him. "You're a man, with all a man's natural passions and

desires. Can you stick it? Have you any idea what it will mean to you?"

"Yes," Yule whispered thickly. "I'm not a fool. I know."

"But that's just what you are," cried Nanetty, exasperated afresh, both at his blindness and her own helplessness. "A fool, a mad fool — and the girl is worse. She's a criminal lunatic!"

"Stop, old girl," said Yule. "Don't say things you'll be sorry for afterwards. There's no use in your raving like that. The thing has got to be. I am going to marry Jessamy on Friday morning. We can spend — the honeymoon"— his lips twisted into a wry smile —"at Caroline Place."

Silence hung like a menace over the room, broken only by the bubbling of the gas. Then Nanetty said, her face turned away:

"That doesn't leave me much time to look for rooms."

Yule jumped to his feet and positively shouted:

"Rooms! Rooms! I'm damned if you're going to look for rooms."

His violence, in some strange way, eased the ache that Nanetty knew would presently be almost unbearable.

"I can't possibly stay on at Caroline Place."

"Why not? Your room is there. Your studio is there. Everything is to be just the same as ever — except — except for Jessamy."

"Which means that nothing can possibly ever again be the same," thought Nanetty, beginning to accept the inevitable, as Yule had known she would. Yet, although she was well aware of the iron streak of obstinacy in Yule, she made one last effort: "Can't you wait a little longer? Why rush into the irrevocable like this? Once you're married you can't unmarry again in a hurry. It's for life, remember. Why this mad haste? For it is mad, you know, if you would only realize it."

"Jessamy wants to feel safe."

"So to be safe from imaginary dangers she has persuaded you to rush into a cage with her from which neither of you can escape as long as you both live!" She could not keep the bitterness out of her tone. "It would be pitiable if it weren't so maddeningly idiotic."

"I can't help it. I've promised. One has to take certain risks in life," said Yule doggedly. Then his face changed, softened to coaxing. "We've got to follow our star, Nanetty, you and I. You said so, remember."

"Nonsense. This isn't a star. It's a will o' the wisp, a marsh light. . . . And as to this insane idea of our all living together like the happy family in a menagerie, it won't work, you know, Yule. Two strange women in a house will never agree. Jessamy and I don't even know each other. We are poles apart. We're bound to clash. We haven't even the mutual bond of caring for you." She could not spare him that thrust.

Yule did not even wince. "That ought to make for harmony rather than discord, I think. You'll give it a trial, anyhow, won't you, Nanetticoat? It's not going to be easy for any of us, just at first especially. You won't make it harder by tearing yourself out of my life like that? You'll stick to me, you'll see me through once more, won't you?"

"Oh, if you're only thinking of your own happiness ——" began Nanetty hardly.

"But I'm not. My happiness —— What does that matter!" He lifted one of her hands and laid it against his cheek. His words came slowly, tinged with that shamefaced reluctance with which the Englishman voices his deeper feelings. "You and I, Nanetty — we've always agreed about that. . . . We've always known that life should be touched to finer issues than the mere attainment of happiness. . . . We've always believed that it isn't our own happiness that matters, but — courage, and kindness, and faith. . . . The way one faces life, rather than what one gets out of it. . . . I've

got to help Jessamy to win through now, and you've got to help me."

"And who's going to help me?" Nanetty broke out.

"We'll all help each other. Anyhow, I can't do without you, Nanetty, old thing. You know that, don't you?"

He turned to kiss the work-worn hand he held.

Nanetty drew it away abruptly.

"Oh, I suppose I do," she sighed grudgingly. She knew that she would have to give in, even against her better judgment. Yule was up and away on his Pegasus now, soaring among the stars, but presently he would come down to earth again, jolted out of his saddle, maybe, by the bump.

It never occurred to her that she might, perhaps, help him better by leaving him to fend for himself: letting him develop his own protections instead of using her as one of them.

"I don't believe in these unnatural inhibitions," Nanetty said suddenly, apropos of nothing. "If you persist in this mad marriage, Yule, make it a real one, not one of these abnormal travesties which are bad for every one."

Yule was silent. It was a silence which quickly grew sharp-edged. He rose stiffly to his feet.

"You don't understand," he said at last, his face very red.

Nanetty's temper, strained as it was to breaking-point, snapped suddenly. It was too much to have such an accusation levelled against her twice in the same day, first by Jessamy and now by Yule.

"Of course not," she cried hotly. "How could a spinster of forty-five possibly understand anything? She is popularly supposed to go through life blind, deaf and utterly incapable of observation. . . . Goodnight, Yule. I think I'd better go to bed."

She gathered up socks, wool and needles, stuffed them hastily into a cretonne bag and turned to leave the room.

Yule, after a moment's hesitance, went after her and put his hand on her shoulder.

"Aren't you even going to give me your good wishes, Nanetty?" he pleaded, rather sadly.

She turned again. "My good wishes?" she echoed bitterly. "What are they worth to you, Yule?"

"Don't, old thing," he said gently.

"My good wishes? . . . Oh, you know you have them, you exasperating creature! You know that I wish you all the joy and gladness which you're putting out of your reach for ever by your own mad folly."

"An original form of congratulation," said Yule dryly. "But fortunately I know that your bark is worse than your bite, old girl. . . . Perhaps I haven't put them quite out of reach after all."

"I wish to God I could think so," cried Nanetty. Then she smiled suddenly. "I believe we were almost on the verge of a quarrel. This won't do, you know, boy. You must learn to control your temper better!"

Yule laughed. The atmosphere seemed suddenly clearer and lighter. "I'll try," he assured her. Then he bent and rubbed his cheek boyishly against hers. "I didn't mean that about not understanding, Nanetty . . . you always understand everything."

At that, Nanetty's last fence broke down. She gave in unconditionally, as she turned and hid against Yule's shoulder for a moment the difficult burning tears that forced themselves to her eyes.

XVI

"WHAT do you make of this, Lucas?" asked Claire Wyatt, holding the letter out to Grote with large white fingers poised as disdainfully as though they held some noxious insect.

The drawing-room at Tudor Lodge, a spacious, gracious room of soft tones, mellow chintzes, warmly-

coloured old china and admirable furniture, made a good setting for the fair placidity of her generous outlines and the pale abundant gold of her hair, now cleverly accentuated by her black gown and long chain and earrings of jet.

"Claire's is the fairness that will last until her hair turns suddenly from gold to silver," thought the man, in whose life she had once shone as the sun, moon, and stars, although she was now no more than the merest necessary rushlight.

Lucas Grote was tall and immaculately tailored. His was that dark, rather Semitic type of good looks which appeals irresistibly to some women. He read the letter through and handed it back to Mrs. Wyatt before speaking. His manner was generally suave and controlled, but from his restless fingering of his small black tooth-brush moustache and the sudden reddish glint in his eyes, Claire knew that he was holding back some violent outburst.

"Do swear if you like, my dear man," she said with that faint elusive smile so characteristic of her, which those who admired her called Mona Lisan and those who did not, sly. "It will relieve my feelings as well."

"I would much rather spank Jessamy," he said thickly. "Damned little brat, what did she mean by putting us all in the cart like this?"

Claire smiled again. "It is only herself whom she has succeeded in 'putting in the cart' as you so elegantly express it, poor foolish child!"

"It's all very well for you. You get your thousand a year in any case. But what about me? A pretty figure I cut, tricked and made a fool of like this!"

"Dear Lucas, is that only hurt pride or is it something deeper?"

"You know I am crazy about the girl. I'll have her too, in the end. . . . There's something about her —— I don't know what, but it . . . I —— Damn it, Claire, I must have her."

"She's a taking child, a most attractive child, but sadly impulsive, I'm afraid," sighed Claire. She brought the battery of her enigmatic pale grey eyes to bear full upon the angry distorted face of the man who leaned against the mantelpiece. "Whatever mad mistake she has made, Lucas, we must bear her no malice for it. Give her enough rope now and she'll ——"

"Hang herself, eh? She's tied herself up pretty tightly, anyhow, with the amount of rope she's stolen for herself."

"Exactly," returned Claire gently. "She will soon tire of this poverty-stricken life which she has chosen and be glad enough to come back to us on our own terms. You know of Edmund's written instructions to me. She doesn't. I was only to withhold my consent to her marriage if the man she wanted to marry had anything against him morally or physically. I was ready to waive a point in your favour, Lucas, for, morally, you know ——" she finished her sentence with a smile and a little shrug.

"Damn it, Claire, you were to get a thousand a year for that," cried Lucas Grote with sudden fury.

"Gently, gently, my dear man. That violence of yours will be your own undoing if you're not careful. Has been, perhaps, for it was something you said the other night which Jessamy must have overheard ——"

"Or you, Claire. I'm hanged if I can remember what we could have said to make her bolt like that."

"What does it matter now? She is impulsive and imaginative, and probably read impossible meanings into half-heard sentences. But to return to the present situation. If Jessamy chose to claim her money I might not be able to refuse it to her legally. The law has so many queer loopholes and barricades that one never knows where one may wriggle through successfully or where one will be stopped dead."

"She won't claim it. In that letter of hers she throws

it as a sop to you to let her alone. She's crazy, of course. Only a high-flown, ignorant girl would have done what she's done, rushed into this insane marriage, in order, as she says, to escape from us for ever. . . . Damned melodramatic, I call it. But she shan't escape me. I'll have her in the end, I tell you, if I have to wait ten years for her."

"Dear Lucas, it is you who are melodramatic now, I think," said Claire, with a calming gesture. "Don't build on such a possibility. There appears to be nothing whatever against the young man whom Jessamy has married. Mr. Heppel says he is quite presentable. The typically respectable bank-clerk, in fact, except for a certain exaltation of manner which, Mr. Heppel said, might be attributed to the excitement of the occasion."

Her words dropped cold as ice upon the heat of Grote's irritation.

"I'd like to excite him," he muttered thickly.

"No doubt you would," Claire answered, with a laugh as cool and tinkling as her words had been. "But do let us look at the situation as dispassionately as possible."

"I don't see how one can be dispassionate in the circumstances."

"You don't, perhaps. Our temperaments differ. We are typically North and South, you and I, Lucas. My anger smoulders. It does not flame. Yours —— is positively volcanic, dear man!" she finished with a little shrug. A glint, hard as glacier-ice, shone in her pale grey eyes. "I do not like being tricked, flouted, defied any more than you do. I am angry with Jessamy. But for your sake I should be quite content to let her drop out of my life for ever and lie on the thorns of the bed she has made for herself."

"You can't do that, Claire. You are my only hope. You had great influence over her once. It can't be entirely gone."

"No," said Claire musingly. "I could twist her

round my little finger until she made that mad flight. Heavens, how frightened I was that night! She deserves to be punished for that."

"Has this fellow Amber any money?"

"He has come in for a house and a small income lately, Mr. Heppel said. 'Enough to keep a wife,' was all he told him. Jessamy appears to have been equally reticent. The whole affair puzzles me. I can't understand it. Did she know the man before? Has she been deceiving us all along? It scarcely seems possible. She hardly ever went out without me. I knew all her friends. Her mind was an open book. She appeared to have no concealments, no duplicities. It must have been one of her mad impulses."

"Or his," muttered Grote.

"He's no fortune-hunter, anyhow."

"Rot! Three hundred a year would be a fortune to a poverty-stricken bank clerk."

"A widower, too," breathed Claire.

"A widower? I didn't know that."

"Yes. Mr. Heppel told me that Jessamy flung this information at him as if it at once established the man's respectability. . . . So like the absurd thing Jessamy would say. She was always so full of ridiculous ideas."

"That was part of her charm. . . . Her quaint unexpected little quips. . . . Oh, damn!"

"Dear Lucas, don't take it so hard." Claire rose and stood beside him. She put one hand on his shoulder and stood looking at him, almost on a level, for an instant. "I'm on your side always, remember. We can't do anything for the moment. We don't even know where she lives, but later on. . . . I know Jessamy. She has been used to the flesh-pots of Egypt for too long not to miss them after a good dose of life as it is lived by the suburban bank clerk. We shall find her sooner or later, and then will come the time to act. Meanwhile, I shall write her a letter and send it to Mr. Heppel to be for-

warded. A tender reproachful letter that will move her to tears and repentance, if I know my Jessamy. She's warm-hearted, affectionate ——"

"God, as if I didn't know that!" Grote groaned and hid his eyes upon his outstretched arms.

Claire looked at him for an instant, a touch of contempt in the ice-green glint of her eyes.

"Do pull yourself together, Lucas. You're a man, not a love-sick schoolboy."

He swung round to face her, his hands suddenly clenched. For a moment she thought that he was going to strike her. She did not move. The contempt in her eyes changed to amusement as his hands dropped to his sides.

"You're right. I'll remember. I *am* a man, by God, and I mean to have my woman, by fair means or foul."

"You've had an overdose of the pictures lately," said Claire in her soft amused way. "That would make a perfect sub-title for an emotional scene. No. . . . I'm not really laughing at you, Lucas. I'm only trying to help you to recover your self-respect. You won't do that by being melodramatic."

Grote swerved away from the mantelpiece and strode to the window. Tudor Lodge stood in its own grounds, away from the road. In the garden beneath scillas nodded in blue delight round the base of a grey stone bird-bath. A thrush perched on the top-most bough of an almond tree above it, poured his full heart out in the rapture of his even-song. Purple and white crocuses edged the formal borders, in which daffodils already hung their heavy pondering buds above the brown earth. The evening sunlight shone upon the promise of spring: a promise which found no echo in the heavy heart of the man who looked through the window with drawn brows above unseeing eyes.

Claire's gaze followed him. She moved her chair nearer to the fire and sat down again, still flicking her

glance towards him now and then. The room was warm and sweet with the mingled scents of hyacinths and freesias.

Claire liked strong, sensuous perfume in flowers. For herself she used only the suggestion of some subtle Parisian essence, faint yet characteristic. As she sat, her white hands played idly with the cut-jet ball that ended her chain, twisting it this way and that so that its facets caught red gleams from the firelight. She was content to wait until Grote had recaptured his self-control.

Sooner than she had expected he turned from the window and came quietly towards her. She had been half afraid of an outburst after her jibe about the cinema. At times she still feared him a little as a strong woman will always fear the man who has once mastered her. But the wild beast in Lucas Grote was no longer uppermost. It was curbed into subjection and on its leash once more. His manner was at its normal, suave and controlled, when he spoke again.

"I don't often treat you to a scene nowadays, do I, Clair-de-lune?" he asked, using a name of the old days, whose employment now generally meant that he wanted to propitiate her. "But you must admit that the circumstances are unusual."

"Quite. It's better to get it all out at once. Sit down again. Smoke if you like. There's a box of Coronas over there on the cabinet. Let us talk this over quietly. I don't wonder that you feel sore."

Grote went to the cabinet, selected a cigar, prepared and lit it meticulously. The half mechanical, wholly ordinary process seemed to steady him, as Claire had intended it to do. Meanwhile, her voice flowed on soothingly.

"There is no need for histrionics or heroics. Our rôle is hurt surprise and bitter disappointment. Heaven knows that's true enough." Claire sighed, not acknowl-

edging in her inmost heart a faint relief that Lucas had not yet married Jessamy.

Only she herself knew how slight was her real power over the man who still held the only fragment of her love which she had ever been able to detach from herself. When he married Jessamy that slender grasp would be wrenched away for ever. Only the cruder power of the money with which he bribed her would be left to her. Power was Claire Wyatt's god, monetary or otherwise That was why she had married Edmund Wyatt and attached his fledging daughter to her. That was why she had fostered her former lover's sudden mad passion for the girl. That was why she was ready to fall in with his plans for her recapture.

"Ours must be the noble, the disinterested gesture. The money question mustn't enter into it at all," she continued. "To judge by Mr. Heppel's account over the 'phone, there is something odd about this marriage of Jessamy's. We have only to wait, to be circumspect and even generous, and all will yet be well."

Grote caught a little of her certainty. Her quiet assurance excited him. Claire was always far-sighted.

"Divorce — it can be arranged without much difficulty later, if she's willing. . . . Then, on our wedding day you will restore to Jessamy her thousand a year and I will settle the same amount on you for life," Grote declared. "That promise holds."

"Dear Lucas, that is very generous of you," smiled Claire, with an inward appreciation of the subtle irony of thus arranging Jessamy's future on the actual day of her marriage to another man. "I am glad that you agree with me about the waiting policy. It is our only chance, believe me. Jessamy must be left to recover from this absurd fright of hers. My letter must be given time to sink in. She must feel perfectly 'safe' as she so ridiculously puts it, before we can venture on a fresh move of any kind. Much depends on this wretched bank

clerk with whom she has rushed so wildly into matrimony. He is the unknown factor in the case. I wonder if he's bribable?"

"Every man has his price," quoted Grote. "I fancy I'm rich enough to buy him if necessary, though I'd rather wring the beggar's neck."

"There's no acquittal for a *crime passionel* in this country, I'm afraid," Claire began, with her slow smile, stopping abruptly as the door opened to admit a smart parlour maid.

"Yes, what is it, Barton?" she asked rather sharply, annoyed at the interruption.

"A gentleman wishes to know if you will see him, madam."

"I can't see any one at this hour. It must be seven o'clock."

"The hall clock has just struck the hour. Am I to say that you are engaged, madam?"

"Yes. No, wait a minute. Perhaps he's some one from Mr. Heppel. Didn't he give you a card?"

"No, madam. He gave his name, though. He said to ask you if you would be good enough to see Mr. Yule Amber for a few minutes."

"That fellow!" Grote made a step forward, his face suddenly suffused.

Claire laid her hand on his arm and spoke in a low rapid tone.

"Stop, Lucas. Don't you know that this is the very opportunity we were wishing for? . . . You mustn't see him. You'd blunder — very naturally — and spoil everything. Go into the study and don't come back until I send for you." She turned to the maid. "Tell Mr. Amber that I will see him for a moment." When Barton had gone she gave Grote a little push towards the door. "Go quickly. Leave this to me. I'll manage."

Grote's angry eyes softened, took on a dog-like appeal.

"You were always rather wonderful, you know, Clair-de-lune."

"Oh, do go," she cried with rare impatience.

XVII

As the door closed behind him Claire turned quickly to the mirror.

"I am looking far too well for the part of the heart-broken mother," she decided.

With a swiftness unexpected in one of her large proportions she opened a black brocade bag which hung on the arm of her chair and extracted from it a powder-puff and a blue eye-pencil, with which she skilfully deepened the shadows beneath her eyes and added artistically to her natural pallor.

Pencil and puff were scarcely back in the bag when the door opened behind her.

"Mr. Amber," announced Barton, looking at the unexpected visitor with a lively curiosity.

Claire turned with a graceful, dignified movement, to see a thin, very bright-eyed young man, with reddish hair and a long characteristic mouth, facing her nervously. His blue serge suit was new and tolerably well cut. He held a grey velours hat tightly clasped in strained-looking fingers.

She bowed. "You are Mr. Amber?"

"Yes. I am Yule Amber."

"You cannot expect me to give you a very warm welcome, Mr. Amber," Claire said rather coldly. "You wished to see me?" She paused, awaiting his explanation. She was desirous of placing him at as great a disadvantage as possible.

A slight flush showed on Yule's rather prominent cheek bones.

"Yes. I felt that it wasn't fair ——" he began, then stopped.

"You felt that it wasn't fair ——?" Claire echoed with raised eyebrows. Then unbending a little, "Won't you sit down, Mr. Amber? There is no need to make this interview any more unpleasant than it must of necessity be."

"No," said Yule in rather a choked voice.

This beautiful pale woman with circles of suffering beneath her grey eyes was very unlike the dominating personality of Jessamy's description, the smooth *intrigante* she had pictured for him.

The mingled emotions — anger, defiance, pity, a sense of fair play — which had fired him to the task of confronting Mrs. Wyatt on this, the evening of his strange wedding-day, suddenly fused into one alone — pity.

Surely Jessamy had been mistaken. Here was no intriguing plotter, but a woman such as the girl had originally thought her, and whom she had made suffer cruelly by her escapade. That was self-evident in the pallor of her face and the weariness of her eyes.

Claire would have been amused could she have read his thoughts and seen the swift effect of her artistic touches. She sat there, calmly enjoying his embarrassment, and doing nothing to relieve it. She had not often so delicious an opportunity of playing cat to such a mouse.

"I can't help feeling sorry for her," thought the unconscious Yule, unaware that he had mounted his Pegasus once more and was preparing to soar to the stars. . . . Nanetty would have known and trembled, had she seen him. . . . "Although I am my Jessamy's man for life and death that needn't prevent me from being sorry for Mrs. Wyatt too —— For 'to be wroth with one we love, Doth work like madness in the brain!'"

Self forgotten, anger lost in sympathy, he plunged forthwith into an explanation of his errand. "I quite realize that it can't be pleasant for you to see me,

Mrs. Wyatt. I only came to reassure you as to Jessamy's safety."

"Mr. Heppel had already done that, thank you," returned Claire, in a tone whose artistic coolness hid the fact of her satisfaction with the impression she was making. "Also Jessamy herself in a letter which — yes, I must say it — cut me to the heart, Mr. Amber." Her voice trembled as she turned away her head with a swift hurt movement that again touched Yule to sympathy.

"I was afraid it would," he cried regretfully. "Jessamy" — he loved the very sound of her name and delighted in saying it — "is very young, very impulsive. Also she is dreadfully sore and shaken at the deception which she thinks has been practised on her."

"Was it necessary for me to tell her that I had once been engaged to her fiancé?" interrupted Claire, with a show of passion.

"It would have been wiser, I think," said Yule gently. . . . An engagement? . . . Surely Jessamy had hinted at deeper, darker things than that! Could she have been mistaken? If so, their marriage was without point or meaning. . . . That did not bear thinking of just yet.

"Wiser? Wisdom is proverbially difficult of attainment," cried Claire. "The whole affair came about so suddenly, was so idyllic that I don't think I can be blamed if I refrained from doing anything to spoil the romance of it. I was only anxious that Jessamy should enjoy its untarnished beauty to the full. So anxious that I committed the apparently unforgivable sin of omission. I held my peace — justifiably, I thought, and still think — about the boy and girl engagement that had once existed between Lucas Grote and me."

"Why didn't you marry him?" Yule blurted out.

"Because we were too poor. In those days he was not the successful business man that he is now. He was

only a stockbroker's clerk. His fortune on the Stock Exchange had yet to be made. I myself — you see, I am being perfectly frank with you, Mr. Amber, though I admit no need for self-justification — I myself was a penniless girl with no worldly assets save my looks and my small talents. For many years I earned my own living as a *diseuse* — the French word is prettier than the English one, don't you think?" she broke off with rather a pathetic smile.

"Yes," answered Yule nervously. "Please don't think that I wish to force any explanations, but as Jessamy's husband ——"

"Ah, yes," sighed Claire, half closing her eyes. "There lies the bitter tragedy of the whole unfortunate affair. You cannot but be aware, Mr. Amber, that the poor misguided child has only used you as a means of escape from fancied dangers." She awaited rather anxiously an answer which did not come from Yule's tightly-locked lips. The truth of her thrust had pierced his very heart.

"How long have you known her, may I ask?" Mrs. Wyatt pursued with a scarcely perceptible frown.

"Long enough to be ready to stand by her through thick and thin," declared Yule stoutly. Here was his ideal, his justification for his rashness. The very thought of it filled him with a new courage.

"Ah!" breathed Claire. "The foolish child seems to have the faculty of inspiring romantic devotion. Poor Lucas . . ." she stopped abruptly with a deep sigh, as if overcome by some unexpressed emotion.

Yule moved uncomfortably in his chair. The sorrows of the man whom he had supplanted had no real power to prick his conscience, though Mrs. Wyatt's implications caused him a certain disquietude. He looked at her, anxiety in his eyes.

"It is too late to go into that now, Mrs. Wyatt. Jessamy and I are married. It must have been a great

shock to you to hear this. You couldn't have known what sort of man I was, how I might use her. That is what I came to tell you, to let you know. . . . I put it awkwardly, I'm afraid. I'm no phrase-maker. . . . But I — I care for Jessamy," he broke out suddenly. "It will be my — my highest privilege and honour to take care of her, to stand between her and the world, to make her as happy as I possibly can. I had to tell you that. I couldn't sleep tonight without letting you know it."

"That was — kind of you, Mr. Amber."

"Whatever your differences may have been, I couldn't help feeling that you, too, cared for her, that you would be anxious to see what manner of man she had married, to assure yourself that I was neither a cad, a bully nor a fortune-hunter. . . . I'm not any of the three, really," he ended with a smile of singular sweetness. "But you couldn't have known that, so I had to come and tell you."

"No, I couldn't have known that," echoed Claire Wyatt in a curious tone. "Is Jessamy aware that you've come here this evening?"

Yule's face changed. "Not yet. She's — she's overwrought, over-tired from the events of the last few days. I was afraid of upsetting her if I told her beforehand. I know she would have tried to prevent me from coming — and how could I gainsay her on her wedding-day? . . . But things are going to be straight between us always," he said in a tone that rang. "I'll tell her the moment I get back, if she's awake."

"Awake?"

"Yes. She was tired out, poor child, as I told you. I left her at home in charge of my cousin, who said she would put her straight to bed."

Claire stared at him for a moment.

"A strange wedding-day, truly," she said, in rather a dry tone.

Yule smiled at her. "Yes, isn't it? . . . But I like things out of the ordinary, don't you? I've only just stepped out of a deep groove, and I'm never going back to one again."

Claire opened her lips as if to speak: then suddenly changed the form of her sentence.

"May I ask what is your income, Mr. Amber?"

"Five hundred a year and a house," he answered with an absurd pride.

Claire cleverly curbed a smile to a mere twitching of her long thin lips.

"Ah! . . . Then with Jessamy's three hundred a year your joint annual income will amount to eight hundred pounds! . . . A positive fortune!"

"Yes, isn't it?" answered Yule simply.

Claire Wyatt's lips twitched again, then smoothed themselves to gravity.

"Are you going to tell me where you live?"

"No, Mrs. Wyatt, not without Jessamy's consent." Yule felt adamantine as he made this answer. Jessamy should not say that her step-mother had "got" him yet.

"Will you do me a favour, Mr. Amber?" Claire's tone was low and sweetly pleading.

"A hundred, if only I can," answered Yule eagerly.

"Will you try to disabuse the poor child's mind of this monstrous delusion about Lucas and me?" said Claire with a deep earnestness that impressed Yule in spite of himself.

"If you assure me on your honour ——"

"On my honour, Mr. Amber. Why should he or I wish to deceive her? He is heart-broken, poor man, and as for me — I can't tell you how I've suffered."

"I am sorry ——"

"Prove your sympathy by trying to persuade Jessamy that she is making some dreadful mistake about what she imagines she overheard that evening."

"I'll do my best."

"All I want is just to be friends with her again. I am content to wait. I have no wish to force myself on her. I know quite well that with young people everything is either jet-black or snow-white. They admit no gradations between the two, as we older people have learned to do."

Most skilfully she placed Yule Amber on her own plane. "I am quite ready to concede that Jessamy has a grievance in this slight deception we have practised on her ——"

"It wasn't a slight deception for her."

"She has magnified it into an obsession."

"Obsession or no, she has had a shock from which it will take her some time to recover. The bitterest thing in the world is to be deceived by those whom you love best, no matter in how slight a degree. There is no other disillusionment like it, especially when one is too young, as you say, to see things in their true perspective. The very best way to help Jessamy to recover her poise is to leave her unworried, where she is, amongst new people and in absolutely new surroundings."

"I assure you that neither Lucas Grote nor I have the slightest desire to worry Jessamy," returned Claire with dignity.

"I'm sure you haven't," Yule hastened to say. He rose. "There is no use in inflicting myself any longer on you, Mrs. Wyatt. It was good of you to receive me and to listen to me so graciously."

Graciously? . . . Claire smiled. There was the desired impression already created, graciousness, patience, wounded feelings held under restraint. She rose, too, and extended her hand.

"I did not realize when I decided to admit you that our interview would leave me with so much an easier mind, Mr. Amber. . . . You have my address. If ever you or Jessamy should wish to write to me or come to see me you know where to find me. I shall always be

ready to let bygones be bygones whenever you may elect to do so."

"It is scarcely a matter for my decision," Yule began rather awkwardly.

"But I trust you, Mr. Amber, to do your best with Jessamy."

"I can at least promise you that."

"If there is anything I can do——" Claire looked about her suggestively at the rich comfort of her surroundings. "Probably in your more restricted ménage Jessamy will not have all that she has been accustomed to——"

"She will be none the worse for that," Yule cut in with a firmness that surprised his hearer. "We shall have enough to supply our needs and give us all the things that really matter. That is, as far as money can procure those — which isn't very far, as I daresay you know."

"Money?" echoed Claire, slightly puzzled. . . . What a fool the man was! There were few things which money couldn't buy. "Money is power, Mr. Amber."

"Only over material things. It can't buy any of the essentials."

"What are they?"

Yule smiled. "Now you are condescending to laugh at me, Mrs. Wyatt. A woman like you must have found out what are the essentials of life long ago."

"Power," rose to Claire Wyatt's lips, but she did not voice her thought. "Power and money, two wings of the same bird!"

She smiled questioningly at Yule, but said nothing, letting her eyes speak for her.

Yule answered quickly. "The great secret of living, as no doubt you know, is to find out the things that really matter and the things that don't, and to eliminate the latter."

"Quite," said Claire non-committally. She moved

towards the door, as if to indicate that their interview was at an end. "Then I can trust you to be kind to my poor, wild, impulsive Jessamy?"

"Kind?" Yule gave a queer excited little laugh and his eyes shone suddenly. "She's my Jessamy from today. . . . Yes. . . . I think you *can* trust me to be at least kind to her. Surely kindness is one of the things that matter."

"How true!" sighed Claire. "Will you let yourself out, Mr. Amber?"

She was anxious for him to go. She did not want to linger in the hall lest Lucas Grote should suddenly appear. She dared not risk an encounter between the two men at such a critical moment in their affairs. It would wreck the trembling poise of her delicate re-adjustments.

"Certainly, Mrs. Wyatt. Good-bye again, and thank you for your courteous reception of an unwelcome intruder."

Claire Wyatt surprised herself by calling impulsively after him: "You will never be that again, Mr. Amber."

Yule turned and smiled at her.

"Once more, my warmest thanks."

XVIII

Yule Amber was gone.

As Claire went slowly back to the secluded warmth of the drawing-room a little shiver shook her. She felt suddenly cold and tired, and knew that the reaction had come after the strain of the past few days. She took up the poker and stirred the fire to a blaze; then bent and held her hands towards it, looking at them idly.

Yes, they were well-shaped hands, although they were decidedly larger than she would have wished. She was a student of hands, knowing what an asset, or otherwise, they were on the lesser stage, as well as on the great

stage of life. Jessamy's hands, for instance, were slim and pretty: hands whose possibilities had not yet been exploited. Lucas Grote's, strong, masculine, hairy, could easily be cruel. Yule Amber's were long and sensitive and rather bony: still, for all that, they could touch gently, she imagined. Her own — she looked at them again and noted the rose-red beauty of the flame-light seen through her closed fingers. They were hands of character, she decided: powerful hands: smooth, subtle hands. Just the sort of hands that should be hers.

Dusk had fallen without, and shadows filled the room outside the radius of the leaping firelight, which struck dancing butterflies of reflections from the gleam of glass and china and old polished furniture.

A belated flute-like note from the thrush, now flown to an elm, made Claire turn suddenly to look out of the window. Through its wide upper pane she caught sight of a silver crescent floating in a pale green sky.

She shivered again, then shrugged her shoulders at her own folly.

"Has any one ever really traced any bad luck to seeing the new moon through glass?" she wondered, leaning a little closer to the fire. "But what a day it has been! First, Mr. Heppel's news of Jessamy's mad marriage, then Jessamy's dreadful letter, then the scene with Lucas and finally this Amber man! . . . No, not finally, I'm afraid. There'll be Lucas again. . . . No, not that yet. We must have dinner first. I'll ring and tell them to hurry it up."

She pressed the bell near the fireplace. A moment later Barton appeared and stood expectant near the door.

"You rang, madam?"

"Yes. Tell Cook to serve dinner as soon as it's ready."

"Yes, madam. That will be in a few minutes I think. It's just on eight now."

"Really?" Claire had not realized the quick passage of time. "Tell Mr. Grote that I am disengaged. He is in the library."

"Very good, madam."

Mrs. Wyatt was well served. It was seldom that caprice was allowed to interfere with the ordered routine of the house. It would not do so now, though its mistress imagined that her word was law; for the autocrat of the kitchen was not to be hastened from her appointed hours at the last moment by any other autocrat, however powerful.

Claire had a momentary wish, as foolish as it was unlikely to be fulfilled, that Lucas Grote might, on some sudden umbrage, have left the house, and so spared her the forthcoming inevitable scene.

"Lucas is all broad, crude effects," she mused. "He has no nuances. Now, the other man *has* nuances. . . . Still, Jessamy is scarcely subtle enough to appreciate that. . . . I wonder where she came across him . . . where, when or how they drifted together —— Ah, Lucas!"

The door had opened suddenly. Lucas Grote strode in and faced her rather truculently. She bit her lip. She knew that mood.

"Well?" he asked impatiently. "What's the fellow's price?"

Claire looked up and shook her head. Certainly Lucas *was* crude!

"If he has one I haven't discovered it yet," she said, surprised at an inward tinge of resentment at the question.

Lucas took up his favourite position before the fire and stood there confronting her.

"All his actions are typical and easily foreseen," Claire thought, a smile curving her long lips. "Now that Amber man is, at least, unexpected. In his own way, too, he's just as masculine as Lucas. Not animal

male, perhaps. . . . Human male. . . . Queer creations!"

"You mean, then, that he's more fool than knave?" demanded Lucas.

"That's one way of putting it."

"Isn't it the right way?"

"I — suppose so."

"Hang it all, Claire, what do you mean? Can't you see that I'm on fire, consuming with impatience? Your coolness maddens me!"

"My ice and your fire! . . . Poor Lucas!" She mocked him delicately. "I suppose, crudely speaking, that you're right. Yule Amber is decidedly more fool than knave, though, mind you, I don't really admit that he's either."

"What did he come here for? Bluster, brag, blackmail?"

"Oh, my dear Lucas, don't be so alliterative!" cried Claire, feeling almost hysterical. "He came purely to relieve my feelings and to tell me that the man Jessamy had married was neither a cad, a bully nor a fortune-hunter!"

"The man Jessamy — but wasn't it ——?"

"Of course it was he himself. That was only my way of putting it," returned Claire rather sharply. "The whole affair puzzles me, Lucas. The man is obviously in love with Jessamy ——"

"Damn his insolence!"

"He means to be good to her," Claire continued more calmly. "He has promised to do his best to make peace between us."

"The deuce he has!"

"But he wouldn't tell me where he lives, nor will he let me see Jessamy until she herself wishes it. . . . They will have eight hundred a year between them." She paused suggestively.

"A goodly income," sneered Grote.

"He thinks it a fortune. Honestly, he does, Lucas."

"That shows the pettiness of his outlook," exclaimed Grote, his brow clearing. "If you're right about Jessamy being a little Sybarite we'll have her back again before very long. 'Plain living and high thinking' is all very well for a time by way of a change, but she'll soon tire of it, especially as she can't even care for the fellow. She can't. I swear it. I know. . . . She . . . I——" He broke off, flushing darkly.

"I know. I know," said Claire, with a soothing touch on his arm. "At any rate I have done my best. I have completely disarmed this Amber man. I have told him a story of our little affair with sufficient truth in it to make it sound thoroughly convincing. I think that I even detected in his face a sudden qualm about this impossible marriage. . . . But don't build too much on that. It quickly vanished. . . . The man's an enthusiast, an idealist, rather."

"Then he certainly must be a fool. The two are synonymous," grunted Grote.

"Perhaps you're right," sighed Claire softly.

"I know I am."

"Dinner is served, madam," said Barton, appearing noiselessly.

Claire drew a long breath of relief and rose with eagerness.

"I don't think I was ever more glad to hear it," she said.

She went over to Grote and slipped her hand through his arm.

"I think we had better have a bottle of Pommery to celebrate the occasion," she said almost gaily. "We can drink a speedy disillusionment to our bride and bridegroom and a happy issue out of our present impasse."

Even as she looked into Grote's lowering face and saw it soften at her toast, a phrase of Yule Amber's came

back to her mind, ringing in her ears with the insistence of a bell.

"Surely kindness is one of the things that matter!"

Was it kind ——? She shook off the thought impatiently as she went into dinner.

XIX

"I KNOW by the look in your eyes that you have been doing something foolish," declared Nanetty as she faced Yule across the débris of the supper-table. They had fenced with each other pleasantly until now, on this most difficult of occasions.

"It all depends on what you call foolish," Yule countered with a provoking smile. "Come, old thing, use your usual clairvoyance and tell me what it was."

"Clairvoyance! . . . Claire! . . . I believe I know," she cried on a note of triumph.

"Well, I couldn't help it!" Yule threw down the glove and challenged her to pick it up. "It wasn't fair to her, no matter how badly she had behaved to Jessamy, not to let her know that she hadn't got into bad hands."

"What an involved sentence!" mocked Nanetty, leaning her elbows on the table and putting her chin on her hands. "Disentangling one 'she' from another how did you convey that interesting piece of information to Mrs. Wyatt?"

"I just told her that I wasn't either a cad, a bully or a fortune-hunter and that I meant to take good care of Jessamy."

"Oh!" breathed Nanetty, her shrewd eyes softening to tenderness. "And did she believe you?"

"I hope so."

"And you gave her our address and asked her to come to tea?"

"No. To breakfast tomorrow!" Yule answered in the same vein. "Look here, Nanetty, Mrs. Wyatt told me that she and this man Grote were once engaged.

They couldn't get married because they were too poor. They didn't tell Jessamy anything about it because Mrs. Wyatt said she — she didn't want to do anything that might spoil her — Jessamy's idyll."

"Where ignorance is bliss, 'Tis folly to be wise," quoted Nanetty dryly. "That's a different version from Jessamy's. A considerable bowdlerized edition."

"Nanetty, don't you think that Jessamy may have been mistaken, may have misunderstood what she overheard? When a young girl is — is in love she's apt to be frightfully jealous, isn't she? — and to magnify molehills into mountains and — and to imagine all sorts of things? . . . What do you think, Nanetty?"

"I think that Mrs. Wyatt must be a clever woman."

"You don't believe in her, then?"

"No."

"But Nanetty, if you'd only seen her! She looked so pale, so unhappy — just as if she'd been crying her poor eyes out. There were tears in them as she spoke to me of Jessamy and told me how miserable she had been about her."

"Very likely her conscience pricked her."

"Nanetty! How can you be so hard, so uncharitable? It isn't like you."

"It's very like me, my dear, if you only realized it," retorted Nanetty with a little shrug of her crooked shoulder. "You're apt to be a bit of a nuisance, you know, Yule, when you mount your hobby-horse of Duty. You think it's Pegasus and that it's going to bear you to the stars, but it isn't, really, and it doesn't. It only lands you in all sorts of awkward and probably muddy places. It's not going to plump you down by that poor girl to-night and make you tell her of the family conclave, I hope?"

"Do you really think I'd better not?" asked Yule disappointedly. "I want to have everything absolutely straight between us from the beginning."

Nanetty groaned. "If you want Jessamy to have a wakeful, wretched night tell her by all means."

"Pig-dog, why are you so cross?" asked Yule, stretching out his hand to her.

Nanetty blinked rapidly. "I'm tired, I expect. I'm always cross when I'm tired. . . . Yule, I've arranged with Mrs. Daylight to come here and live in for the present. She is very pleased, as she was worrying about our future without her. She foresaw either gaol or the workhouse for us, I fancy, without her restraining influence!"

Nanetty tried to speak with ordinary cheerfulness, but she really felt desperately tired and anxious about that future at which she seemed to mock. Only in the normal, the commonplace did safety lie, to her over-strained perceptions. The exigencies of the move and all the previous preparations had exhausted her physically. The bewildering uncertainty of the result of Yule's wild leap in the dark, the disappointment of this triangular ménage, beset with difficulties as it was, tried her emotionally and mentally to the very limit of her endurance.

"Good!" Yule returned absently. "Hadn't you better see about getting some sort of maid as well? You won't have time ——"

"No, I shan't have time. I am in arrears with my work for old Brand already. . . . But that's not my business any more, Yule. It's Jessamy's."

"Jessamy's? Oh, but ——"

"Now, my dear Yule, don't continue the bad work of spoiling that girl. She has married you and consequently taken certain responsibilities upon herself. If she isn't capable of carrying them out at present the sooner she trains herself to become so, the better for you both. If you are to have any chance of happiness in your future life you've got to build it up between you: and you've got to start at once, mind! Happiness won't fall ready-made into your laps if you only sit down

and wait for it. You've got to earn it. You've got to work for it. For goodness sake, give Jessamy plenty of occupation. She has thrust herself into a way of living which is entirely new to her. It's up to you to make it as interesting, as absorbing as you can."

"How on earth am I to do that? You *must* help me, Nanetty."

"Find out her wants and will and meet her there!" misquoted Nanetty, with a twisted little smile. "Perhaps eventually you'll be able to mould her nearer to your heart's desire! I'm sure I hope so."

"She couldn't be any nearer to my heart's desire than she is at present," thought Yule, with an instant vision of the appealing loveliness that had captured both heart and senses: but he could not say so, even to Nanetty.

"This is my last chance of sermonizing at you," Nanetty pursued. "After to-night I become a mere onlooker at the game, which you've got to play yourselves, remember. That doesn't mean that I'm not ready to take my usual share of the household duties and to help you and Jessamy in any way I can, but from to-morrow I resign my keys of office. I am mistress of your house no longer." She paused for a moment. Yule was unaware of the poignance of her abdication. He did not know that it was a throne, albeit an acknowledged temporary one, from which she stepped down with such a hard-won dignity. "To-morrow Jessamy must take her proper place as your wife, and see to things herself."

It was rather an anti-climax, but Yule did not know that either.

He only smiled and asked: "Have you prepared poor Jessamy for the fate in store for her?"

"In a way. When you were out on your mysterious errand."

"How did she take it?"

"She demurred at first, quite charmingly, I admit —

but I think in her inmost heart she was rather pleased. She is used to being a person of importance, you know," Nanetty reminded him dryly. "I'm going to give her her breakfast in bed to-morrow, but after that she's got to get up and order her own life."

"And what is the martinet herself going to do?"

"Finish my Dutch pictures for old Brand, and then start on the Italian ones."

"What a treadmill! It must be a deadly grind."

"It is, rather . . . but one has to earn one's bread and butter, and I can't afford to quarrel with my Brand!"

"I suppose not. . . . How long is it since you've seen Jessamy?"

"Not since I brought down her supper-tray. I expect she's asleep by this."

Nanetty looked at him and away again. She was unable to voice the aching sympathy that mingled with the sense of exasperation she felt for him. Wide and free as their speech ranged there yet were things between them which could not be said.

"If she's asleep I suppose I might just have a look at her," Yule suggested tentatively, his eyes saying more than his words.

"I don't suppose there could be any objection to that," Nanetty answered with a twist of her lip. "Just give me a hand with these supper-things, Yule. We'll leave them in the kitchen till the morning for Mrs. Daylight to wash up."

Yule was as deft at such domesticities as she, and in a few minutes the table was cleared.

"I found old Henry's silver candlestick to-day and put a fresh candle in it for you, Yule. It's in the hall. Light it, will you."

Yule went out into the half-familiar hall. On the mahogany hat-stand stood the candlestick in its accustomed place. He had often noticed it there for its master on former visits. Now the old order had changed.

Henry Nimmo was dead and Yule Amber reigned in his stead.

His was the quaint old house, full of heavy Victorian furniture. For him the candlestick waited in the hall. When he was gone another would take his place.

For a moment Yule had a vision of the great unceasing procession of life, inevitable, unwavering as the yearly march of the seasons, into which he and his had been swept to take their places until they, too, in their turn dropped out only to be instantly replaced.

The match flared while Yule paused on the thought. He lit the candle just before it burned his fingers, locked the hall-door and put out the gas.

Nanetty was already half way upstairs.

"Nanetty!" he called in a careful yet excited whisper.

"Yes, Yule." She turned towards him, her pale face with its red wings of hair standing out against the dusk of the staircase.

"Old thing, I believe we've come home!" he answered boyishly.

"I wish to God I could think so!" was Nanetty's thought. Aloud she said in her most matter-of-fact tone, "Well, it looks rather like it, doesn't it?"

Not even for Yule's sake could she be enthusiastic to-night.

XX

Nanetty stopped outside the door of Jessamy's bedroom and took the candle from Yule's hand. She opened the door softly and went in.

The room was in darkness. From the passage outside where he stood, a-thrill with excitement, Yule could only discern the half-illumined figure of his cousin as she moved gently towards the bed. She bent over it, then turned and beckoned to him.

With thudding pulses he entered, feeling as if he should have taken off his shoes first.

Already the room seemed redolent of Jessamy's personality. The candle-light fell on little lavender satin mules by the chair near her bed. The cobweb lace of the filmy garment she wore was threaded with lavender ribbons.

But Yule had no eye for the detail of slipper or lingerie. He sensed only the mystery, the exquisite aroma of the femininity which had so surprisingly given itself into his keeping. He had eyes only for the lovely curve of the recumbent figure in old Henry Nimmo's four-post bed whose faded green chintz hangings had once belonged to a mutual grandmother.

Jessamy lay on her side, one hand under her cheek, the other lying outside the bedclothes, its fingers curling, rose-tipped as the petals of flowers. Her hair was loose about the pillow, its dark abundant waves instinct with life. Her lashes made black curves across her cheeks. She looked very young, as she lay there, pathetically unaware of their scrutiny.

Yule forgot time, space, circumstance, as he gazed, painting upon his inner vision a memory that was to companion him later throughout his solitary wedding-night.

So beautiful a shell must surely encase an equally beautiful spirit, he thought in his rapt gazing. . . . What mysteries were here, prisoned within the cage of a body, through whose five momentarily-shuttered windows the soul peered out?

Would he ever approach, ever commingle with that strange, secret life of the spirit which even those who are nearest and dearest never wholly share? . . . What hidden capacities for love, joy, sorrow, suffering lay within that mortal fragility?

He burned with a fire of desire to stand ever between it and aught that would do it hurt, bodily or spiritually: yet even with the thought came a swift reminder of the inevitable inner loneliness of every human being. From hurts bodily he might be able to defend her: from hurts

spiritual none could protect her save God and her own soul.

As Amber looked at Jessamy so Nanetty looked at him. As he burned to shield his new-made wife, who yet was no wife, so she yearned over him. His realization of his own helplessness became hers, only with an added bitterness: for while it was Yule's duty to shield his wife it was Nanetty's to stand aside and let him prove his manhood, alone, unaided. Even though she longed to help, the gesture of renunciation was already hers.

She could help Yule best by withdrawal. Her activities must be curbed. There must be no divided allegiance. Yule must learn to turn to Jessamy now for what *she* had always given him. For her the rough road, the way of the Spartan: for her the rôle of passivity, perhaps the most difficult part to play of all. For who does not find it both pleasanter and more profitable to take a personal hand in the game than to play the unproductive rôle of the looker-on?

Nanetty's face sharpened and her grey eyes clouded to suffering. Yule suddenly drew himself up with a sense of having violated a privacy which he, of all men, should have held inviolable.

"We'd better go, Nanetty," he whispered. "It isn't fair to trespass like this while the keeper of the gate is sleeping, unable either to debar or admit."

"No, it isn't," Nanetty whispered back. "A sleeping person always seems so defenceless. We really have no right to look at her when she doesn't know we're here. . . . Come, Yule."

But Yule had dropped on one knee, to kiss a strand of the silky, vital hair, whose scent almost intoxicated him.

Nanetty turned away. She did not want to trespass further. All at once she felt very old, very weary, very lonely.

The suddenness with which this mad happening had come about seemed somehow to point to its inevitability.

Three short days ago neither she nor Yule had known that there was such a person in the world as Jessamy Wyatt, yet here to-night was she woven into the closest, most intimate strand of their mutual life.

She glanced back again at the still sleeping girl.

For her, the old four-post bed held no such vision of glamorous loveliness as it did for Yule. She saw merely a pale, pretty, tired girl, full of possibilities, doubtless, as the ovary of a flower is full of seeds — but unlike the flower one could not foretell what the blossoms of such possibilities might be. From a rose would come forth roses, from a thistle, thistles, but both roses and thistles might flourish alike in the garden of a young girl's being. Who could tell? If only Jessamy came to love Yule all might yet be well, for love alone can work miracles. But would she? Could she? That was the crux. Perhaps in the revulsion from the other man's deception — but that wasn't what Nanetty had wanted for Yule. She had desired for him something fuller, something richer and more fragrant than the mere re-bound of a girl's wayward fancy.

She sighed. Yule had risen and stood beside her. His face was very white but his eyes shone.

"Come away," he whispered. "The garden gate is locked."

"Isn't the key yours?" Nanetty whispered back fiercely.

"Not until she gives it to me herself. I'm not going to steal it."

"I thought she did give it to you herself this morning."

"Nanetticoat, you're a great goose," murmured Yule, pushing her gently towards the door. "Didn't you know that I gave it back to her again to keep until she *wants* to give it to me?"

He closed the door of the sanctuary gently behind him and stood facing his cousin.

"It's you who are the goose, or rather gander,"

Nanetty retorted. "Most girls prefer a brigand to Don Quixote."

"My girl doesn't," said Yule Amber softly.

"How do you know?"

"Well, assuming that Grote is the brigand and I the Quixote, hasn't she preferred me to him?"

"She has married you, certainly," Nanetty returned. "But I should not flatter myself, if I were you, that any real preference was implied by that."

Even as the words escaped her she was aghast at her own cruelty. But Yule was impervious. To-night he wore chain-mail. Nothing could hurt him. All he wanted was to be alone to dream over his Vision Splendid. His were the first rapt throes of love while yet the spiritual necessities come before the physical. In such an exaltation as now filled him flesh did not yet predominate sufficiently to war with spirit. That was to come with later urgencies.

Tonight he was content that his sense of possession should be physical rather than actual, mental rather than physical. He had as yet no realization of the fact that in no way did he possess this stranger girl who had married him save in the barest legal sense. He had forgotten Claire Wyatt and her revelation of the afternoon in the ecstasy of the thought of Jessamy asleep. The qualms which had beset him earlier had vanished.

He did not even take in the sense of Nanetty's gibe. He just stood and looked at her, his plain thin face irradiated by that inner light which suddenly irritated Nanetty and made her once more want to shake him.

"Goodnight, old thing" he said kindly. "You look tired out. Sleep well. You must take things quietly to-morrow."

"And all the other to-morrows," said Nanetty with a queer little laugh. "Your second wedding-night ——" she stopped abruptly and went up the stairs to the attics which she had chosen for herself: one as a bedroom,

because it looked out on the river, the other as a studio because of its excellent north light.

Yule looked after her for a moment. "Poor old Nanetticoat!"

Then he glanced at Jessamy's door. "The sword is drawn," he breathed: finally he opened the door of the bedroom allotted to himself, went in and crossed over to the window, a French one which opened on to a crazy iron balcony.

He was afraid to venture his weight on it without further testing, but he pushed the window wide open and leaned against it, drinking in the quiet, the sense of space and the eternal peace of the stars.

Beyond the wall at the other side of the road the river flowed, quiet, persistent, unhurried. The sound of it came to him through the darkness soothingly. The sight of it came occasionally with a sudden glimmer. Peace, quiet, space: what he had always wanted. . . . Verily, he *had* come home at last! . . . And if unto these three great things yet another was to be added — love — truly his world would be full of wonder and beauty to over-flowing.

Forgotten was the mundane, blotted out the little nagging worries and pinpricks of everyday existence. Forgotten even was the flashing memory of that first unfortunate wedding-night which Nanetty's words had evoked. Had he had mind for comparison the austerity, the solitariness of this one would have seemed sweet near the enforced intimacies of that other. Could brides and bridals have been changed — but that would have meant that Jessamy ——

No. Yule Amber was rapt into a still, ecstatic content with this strangest of strange wedding-nights, which yet brought to him a greater strength and courage than any ravished raptures could have done.

Jessamy trusted him: she had married him: she slept there in peace and safety under his roof, which should

henceforth be her roof too. Reticent himself, he would respect her reticences: modest, her modesties. To be chivalrous, to be clean-minded never made one less of a man, thought Yule, quite aware of the fact that men of Lucas Grote's character would have dubbed him milk-sop. That troubled him but little as he searched for pencil and paper wherewith he might recapture the absent face that fixed him! . . .

"If Brother Ass, as St. Francis called the body, grows troublesome I must only take a big stick to him," was his last thought that night before sleep took him, having torn up all his efforts at drawing Jessamy.

PART II

MARSHLIGHT

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MARSHLIGHT

I

Caroline Place consisted of three narrow cream-coloured houses tucked away at the unfashionable end of the Chelsea Embankment. Once the locality had been more favoured by that entity which calls itself Society, but with the spreading of business upon the river-side, the encroaching of trade upon its fringes, Fashion took fright and receded fastidiously westward, leaving Caroline Place stranded, a forlorn little oasis of gentility.

Now it was scarcely even genteel: yet somehow that old-fashioned Victorian word seemed the only one which really suited it, Yule Amber had often thought, before he ever dreamed that some day No. 1 would be his.

From the windows you looked across the road to the broad pavement edged with occasional plane-trees, whose flaky boughs and thin dark twigs etched themselves against a winter sky of cloudy grey or sunset red, or in summer massed their peaked green leaves and spiky tassel-blossoms against the blue. From spring to autumn sparrows innumerable twittered and gossipped in their branches. Winter brought the glossy piping starlings there to chatter among themselves and whistle to their human neighbours with that note of encouragement which is one of their sweet elfin secrets.

Beyond the pavement ran the river, whispering its secrets also to the stout old walls of the Embankment. But who may guess the mysteries of the rivers, those "travellers swift from secrets to oblivion," who pass from action to action in their courses, unhasting, unresting, eternally young?

"For they are new, they are fresh; there's no surprise
Like theirs on earth. O strange for evermore!
This moment's Tiber with his shining eyes
Never saw Rome before."

Up and down the broad bosom of the moment's Thames went tugs, fussy and self-important, coal-barges, lighters laden with timber or bales of paper. The motor-boats of the River-Police threaded their quiet way through the innocent-seeming traffic of red-sailed barges with masts sloping back at strange angles, family barges, with painted prows and quaint little deck-houses, or steamers thronged with more or less noisy holiday-makers.

Here, on the river, each of the seven ages of man had its prototype in the varying kinds of craft: an endless panorama of life for those who had eyes to see.

Across the river at its far side loomed the dusky bulk of wharves, warehouses and chimneys, against whose darkness gulls whirled and gleamed like giant snowflakes.

The inhabitants of Caroline Place varied almost as much as the river traffic.

With the passing of Henry Nimmo age had left the precincts of No. 1.

In No. 2 lived Dr. and Mrs. Waldron, a busy, hard-working couple, whose young and growing family might easily have typified youth.

No. 3 was occupied by Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe, who, in spite of the fact that she had once been obliged to take paying guests, had really seen better days, and was very particular about her hyphen and the length of her "y."

Three years before Yule Amber inherited No. 1 she had married (like Yule himself "*en secondes noces*" as she would certainly have put it) the last of her paying guests, a Mr. Percy Smith, who had prospered sufficiently in some mysterious business in the City to enable the plump and still comely widow to be free of paying guests for ever on marrying him.

Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe thanked Providence that her

Percy's name so closely resembled her own, and she insisted upon his adoption of her more aristocratic mode of spelling it. Therefore the blameless Percy had the rakish satisfaction of knowing that he led a double life (albeit a perfectly innocent one): being Mr. Smith by day in the City and Mr. Smythe when in residence at No. 3 Caroline Place.

Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe, one of whose paying guests had been an impoverished French gentleman, whose tenancy of her comfortable rooms had only ceased at his death, had come considerably under the Gallic influence during his lifetime. This caused her frequently to use little French phrases and to speak to her intimates of her new husband as " le P'tit." To her first spouse (the real and authentic Chalfont-Smythe) she invariably alluded as " my husband," to her second as " Percy "—a habit which was wont to cause some confusion in the minds of her hearers.

Such were the new neighbours who were ready to welcome the Amber family to Caroline Place.

II

Nanetty laid the tray on the little round mahogany table by Jessamy's bedside, held out the lavender-silk dressing-jacket embroidered in pale pink chrysanthemums for her to slip into, and picked up a dainty affair of mauve ninon, pale pink ribbon and gossamer lace from the dressing-table.

" Why the boudoir cap?" asked Jessamy with a sleepy smile.

" Because I'm going to send up Yule with your second tea. He wants to speak to you."

" Yule? . . . My second tea? . . ." Jessamy gasped.

But Nanetty had gone. In pursuance of her new policy she was going to leave these two alone to build

their own bridge across the gulf that separated them, though already, she consoled herself by thinking, she had thrown across it the first plank.

As the door closed behind her Jessamy looked at her breakfast tray. Involuntarily her lip curled.

At home, at Tudor Lodge, whenever she desired to have her breakfast in bed, the daintiest of equipment had been hers: finest linen and lace, silver and china: tempting varieties on silver dishes, crystal pots for honey and marmalade: her own teapot with its special little cosy.

Here she had a square tray covered with a tray-cloth which did not fit it. A fried egg and rasher reposed side by side beneath a round tin dish cover. Two slices of bread lay upon her plate with a small slab of butter beside them. A cup of tea, already poured out, was rapidly cooling. There were a few lumps of sugar in a small white bowl, while some marmalade lay on a saucer of a different pattern.

It was all ugly, unappetising to Jessamy's fastidiousness. She turned up her delicate little nose at the wholesome fare. The fleshpots of Egypt called to her for an instant, as Mrs. Wyatt had known that they would. She missed her thin slices of toast in their silver rack, her little teapot sprinkled with violets, her silver cream-ewer full of yellowy cream, her pats of butter daintily rolled on a cut-glass dish.

"That stuff is probably what they call margarine!" she said distastefully, tilting her nose a trifle higher.

It never occurred to her that there were many necessary allowances to be made for this strange new life into which she had thrust herself, unasked: that the move to Caroline Place, considerably hampered by the exigencies of her presence, had taken place only yesterday: that no one had as yet had time to probe its resources properly: that there was only Nanetty —

She had slept long and dreamlessly and was feeling more rested than she had done since her wild flight from

Tudor Lodge. In that healing slumber something of the resilience of her youth had come back to her with its consequent reaction from her previous misery. The numb ache of her betrayal was still there, but a queer dream-like sense now enwrapped her, making her feel as if nothing were real, as if she were but dreaming, and that this experience as well as her past anguish were but the fantasy of a nightmare, from which she must soon awaken.

"I suppose I had better eat something," she told herself, "before 'Yule' is upon me with his second tea!"

She slipped out of bed, caught up the boudoir cap and hastily pinned up her hair. . . . After all, Yule was her husband — (Husband! What a queer word!) He had a perfect right to come into her room if he wished, only — only — a hot blush swept her. She sponged her face with cold water, put on the boudoir cap before the mirror and pulled out her hair becomingly beneath it.

"Poor man, he may as well have some artistic pleasure out of his bargain," she mused, feeling very old and worldly-wise. "I don't suppose he's ever seen a woman in decent negligée before."

She scrambled back into bed again, took the tray on her lap, and began to eat her breakfast, her thoughts rambling meanwhile.

If one started fair . . . if one were only sincere and simple about things, looked things straight in the face, there need be no awkwardness, no embarrassment. . . . Facts were facts. . . . It was entirely her own doing that she had married this total stranger. She must never forget *that* fact, never lose sight of it, no matter how far she might be tempted to run away from its contemplation. . . . One was far more dressed, really, in bed than up. . . . One was completely covered from the waist downwards, and becomingly and decently clothed from the waist upwards — which was more than one could always say of the modern *decolletée*

day-frocks. Even one's hair was covered — quite in the Eastern mode! . . . Yule Amber was no Turk. . . . With a little shiver Jessamy thanked the mysterious Benignity that stood to her for God for that . . . Lucas Grote could be, would have been masterfully possessive. He would not have stood . . . she shivered again and once more that burning blush swept over her whole body. . . . O Lucas, Lucas! The numb ache suddenly grew poignant. Pain stabbed her again at the thought of his falseness.

"I've got safety. I'm safe now," she told herself. "I've got to pay for that. . . . How much, I wonder?"

"Never get anything you can't pay for," had been one of her father's axioms. "Once your mind is made up, once you've decided a thing's worth it, don't grouse at the price."

She had been tricked, deceived by those she trusted. She had lost faith, love, trust. What had she got in exchange? Peace? Safety? Weren't they worth anything one could pay for them? How could she have gone on living with people who had lied to her so grossly? How could she have borne to see them daily, to live out her life beside them, those people whom she had loved so dearly but whom she could never trust again?

"Oh, never, never!" she cried inwardly with all the violent protestation of youth, "Never, never!"

What if she *had* rushed into an unconsidered marriage? . . . Her heart was dead. She could never love any man again. Lucas had done that to her: he had taken her youth and spoiled it, taken her heart and broken it, taken her life and twisted it all awry. . . . She felt a certain grim pleasure in phrasing his devastations.

Anyhow, she meant to play the game now. She would do her part if Yule Amber would do his. Somehow she felt that he would. He had a kind face, a trustworthy face, though he wasn't in the least like the men whom she

had been accustomed to meeting. He was old-fashioned, rather punctilious — not a bit like —— Some women whom she knew made a fetish of their houses. Husbands seemed to play but a remote and secondary part in their lives. She had always wanted a house of her own to experiment with. Here was one to her hand — quite an odd, quaint one, too, full of possibilities. Wouldn't that be doing something quite big for poor Yule? To make his house beautiful, see that his meals were well cooked and temptingly served — (again her lip curled at the diminished slab of butter, which had not been margarine, after all!) —give him harmony in his home instead of ugliness and discord? To serve others — wasn't that the best salve for a broken heart? Not that hers could ever really heal. No, the wound went too deep for that . . . but she must fill her days as best she could. At the thought the housewifely instinct, hitherto without an outlet, rose strongly within her. She pictured the perfect house, run by the perfect staff, gently and easily controlled by herself, its presiding genius.

Across these consolatory visions broke a gentle knocking at her door.

"Come in," she cried, feeling a sudden nervous flurry, quite at variance with her previous calm.

The door opened and Yule entered bearing a round brass tray on which stood a brown teapot and a blue-patterned milk-jug.

"Good morning, Jessamy," he said, as if this wonderful proceeding which had set his pulses leaping were the most ordinary occurrence in the world. "I hope you slept well. Are you ready for another cup of tea?"

"Good morning, Yule," Jessamy answered, with an equally successful effort at self-control. "Yes, I slept very well, and I don't want any more tea, thank you."

"Oh! . . . Then I'd better take back the teapot to Nanetty. She may want some more. Let me take your tray too, if you're sure you've finished."

"Quite, thanks."

Suddenly Yule became aware of the difference between Jessamy's personal belongings and the rather untidy appurtenances of the tray.

"You'll have to forgive our shortcomings this morning," he said anxiously. "Nanetty hasn't unpacked our own linen yet and doesn't quite know where my old cousin's belongings are kept. This can't be anything like what you're used to, but please don't judge our possibilities by to-day."

Suddenly Jessamy felt a childish desire to cry, followed by a prick of shame at her own ingratitude.

"I don't judge you at all," she said rather chokingly. "You're very, very good to me."

Yule almost dropped the tray in his sudden longing to take her in his arms and comfort her. It was only with a big effort that he controlled himself sufficiently to say, in what he fondly hoped was the correct marital tone:

"Nonsense, my dear! . . . How can one be good to oneself? You and I are one now, remember."

"Don't think I've forgotten," said Jessamy very low. "I — I mean to do my best to make you happy and — and comfortable ——"

"For the Lord's sake don't!" cried Yule. "I don't want you to make me comfortable. For the past few years I've been stifled with comfort — cushions, frills, full meals! I've only been able to breathe again under Nanetty's Bohemian régime. . . . Just be happy yourself — or at least as happy as you can. That's all I want."

"Is it?" Jessamy looked up under her lashes at him. Yule thought ecstatically that no one else in the world could have eyelashes so long and curly. "Won't you let me try to make you happy too?"

"You have made me happy already by your trust in me. You make every moment happy just by being under my roof. It's your roof now, remember. Nanetty has

abdicated. She says you must be mistress here from this day forth."

"Yes, I know." Jessamy wrinkled up her nose and smiled.

So long as they could avoid the deeper issues of their unconsidered experiment, so long might they play at being happy. There was a novelty about the present situation which held its own piquancy — so long as one did not stop to probe or to analyze what lay beneath. Safety lay in skimming the shallows and leaving the deeps untroubled. So Jessamy told herself, and Yule was quite content to follow her lead.

"Therefore, after breakfast," Jessamy pursued, with the smile that showed the dimple near the left side of her mouth, "I am to get up and be mistress of my own house."

"So Nanetty says," murmured the enchanted Yule. "But you needn't if you don't like. I've just made a bargain with the tyrant that we are to have a two days' honeymoon — just to-day and to-morrow. . . . I don't mean to go away or anything conventional like that." Yule hastily answered a quick glance and a lifted eyebrow. "I mean for you just to look round and take your bearings, as it were. I don't know whether you'll find the soundings deep or shallow in comparison with Tudor Lodge."

"What do you know about Tudor Lodge?" asked Jessamy rather suspiciously.

Yule's face clouded. He had forgotten, in this new and exquisite delight, the task that lay before him.

"Look here," he said hastily. "May I come back for a minute when I've taken down this tray? Confound the thing, I believe the marmalade's going to fall over the edge."

"No, it isn't," said Jessamy, leaning forward to push the saucer back into its place.

The trivial act seemed to bring a funny little intimacy

with it, though the girl's nearness suddenly troubled Yule's senses and set his heart thudding again.

"I'll have to get that big stick if I'm not careful," he thought. Aloud he said: "Well, may I?"

"I — suppose so," Jessamy answered slowly. "But couldn't you wait until I am up and dressed?"

She felt at a disadvantage there in bed, perfectly clothed as she knew herself to be. It was not that she did not trust Yule. In that self-analysis from which she shrank so nervously she must have discovered how extraordinary and inexplicable was her absolute confidence in this man who was still so utterly a stranger to her.

"I'm sorry," Yule returned. "But I'm afraid I can't. You see, there's something I must tell you. Something we must get straight between us before we can go on any farther."

He was gone, blundering out through the door with his heavily-laden tray. Jessamy lay back on her pillows with quickened pulses, all at once apprehensive of she knew not what. In spite of her determination to keep thought at bay she had a swift flash of realization of how absolutely she was at Yule Amber's mercy. Of her own accord she had thrust her whole life into his keeping, blindly hoping for — what? Oblivion of the past, some sudden change of emotion and temperament with her environment, some spell, wherewith to banish thought and feeling?

How childish! How futile! . . . For however fast one runs one cannot escape from oneself.

She had voluntarily given this man rights over her which only his own chivalry would prevent him from exercising. How frail a barrier to guard that personal freedom which she had relinquished so unthinkingly! Had men any chivalry? Would Lucas ——? She covered her face with her hands again as she thought of the passion of his kisses. A mingled gust of longing and

loathing shook her. . . . What a strange thing the flesh was! . . . How little to be trusted! . . .

So her thoughts spun wildly, incoherently.

Again that knocking at the door broke across them. It was symbolical, she thought, as she gave a rather trembling, "Come in."

III

Once more the entrance of Yule brought a certain calm matter-of-factness with it: a tacit assumption of the ordinariness of this most extraordinary proceeding. No man but her father, or the doctor who attended her in her rare illnesses had ever entered Jessamy's bedroom before. She had pictured sometimes, as a girl will, half shyly, half thrillingly, the entry of the one to whom she would some day give that right. . . . There had been only one such ever in her thoughts, Lucas Grote.

In no circumstances could she possibly have visioned this thin-faced man with his eager eyes and reddish hair, who spoke to her in a language which she had never heard from man before.

Yet there he stood, just inside the door, those bright beseeching eyes asking for permission to approach, his whole manner begging humbly for what had not yet been put into words — some hidden obscure need for her forgiveness.

"Won't you sit down," Jessamy said nervously, indicating a chair.

Yule took the chair and drew it a little nearer to the great old-fashioned bed, whose faded apple-green hangings threw Jessamy's delicate beauty into full relief. The light fell on his face, revealing a reflection of her own nervousness, which oddly enough steadied the girl's pulses and helped to restore her poise.

"What is it — Yule?" she asked gently.

Looking full at her and clasping his hands tightly be-

tween his knees Yule plunged without preamble into the head and front of his offending.

"I went to Tudor Lodge last night. I saw Mrs. Wyatt. I ——"

"You what?" cried Jessamy, paling at the shock of his words. "You saw Claire? You told her ——"

"I told her nothing save that you were safe and well."

"Why did you go near her? Oh, why? Didn't I ——?"

"Listen, dear," said Yule gently. "I had to go. It was only fair to her to let her know that you hadn't been taken advantage of by a scoundrel."

"What was it to her? She ——"

"It was a good deal to her. She loves you, Jessamy. She has suffered greatly on your account."

"And what have I suffered on hers?" cried Jessamy wildly. "Is it nothing to have all you cared for, all you trusted, all you held sacred torn down and trampled in the dust?"

"It is a terrible thing," said Yule gravely. "A very terrible thing, my dear. But perhaps you may have misjudged her. Perhaps ——"

"How could I possibly have misjudged her? Hadn't I the evidence of my own ears?"

"What did you hear exactly?"

"I heard — oh, I can't tell you. It was horrible. More than I told Nanetty. Enough, more than enough to make me know that they had once been — lovers."

"But what was the crime in that?" Yule pursued gently. "They were engaged long ago — Mrs. Wyatt told me so herself last evening — but they were too poor to marry. She did not tell you anything about that early engagement because — because ——"

"Why?" asked Jessamy in a hard tone, two bright spots suddenly springing to burn in her cheeks.

"Because she didn't want to do anything which might

spoil your — idyll — she said." It hurt Yule in some queer way to clothe Jessamy's previous love-affair in words.

Jessamy's look held scorn and a touch of contempt.

"So she's got you! . . . I knew she would. That's why I didn't want you to see her, ever."

"She hasn't got me, you foolish child. Can't you be reasonable? I know that your step-mother deceived you, hurt you, but — but if you could only have seen her as I saw her, pale, unhappy, with tears in her eyes, she'd——"

"She'd get me too! . . . No, thanks," said Jessamy hardly.

"Dear, don't let's begin our life together with rancour and bitterness. Try to forgive Mrs. Wyatt. After all, it isn't a criminal act to have been once engaged to the man you were going to marry."

Jessamy looked at Yule and away again.

"I — didn't mean the word 'lovers' in the innocent sense in which you meant it," she said very low.

"Oh, but, Jessamy ——"

"Oh, but, Yule!" she mocked him deliberately. "She's got you properly. . . . Didn't I tell you that she'd twist you round her little finger?"

"You did — but she didn't. I kept your secret, Jessamy. I told her that she must not even try to see you or find out where you lived, that she must let you absolutely alone."

"Well, that was decent of you, anyhow," Jessamy returned grudgingly.

"You're as safe as ever," Yule assured her. "The next step must come from you, she said."

"Thanks. . . . I'd chop off my feet first."

"Oh, Jessamy — your pretty feet!"

"How do you know they're pretty?"

"I'm not afflicted with blindness," answered Yule, with a smiling glance at the lavender mules.

"Oh, but that's just what you are!" she cried in a

tone of exasperation. "Blind as a bat! . . . Now that the interview is over will you go away, please, and let me get up?"

"But it isn't quite over yet."

"Heavens! Is there more to come?" cried Jessamy. Then her eyes opened wider and grew wild with apprehension. "You didn't — you didn't see — Lucas?"

"No, dear, no. . . . It has nothing to with that. I have a personal confession to make. Last night, when Nanetty came in to see that you were all right I stole in after her and looked at you when you were asleep." He paused for an instant. "I felt I ought to tell you."

Jessamy looked up expectantly. "Yes?"

"That's all. . . . Or practically all," he answered, reddening.

This was not the moment to tell her of the ecstasy which had enfolded him, of the rapture which had swept him from time and place at the touch of her scented hair, of the great tenderness he felt for her as he knelt beside her bed, of the love and service he had vowed towards her, then and always.

"Are you still angry with me?" he asked.

Something in his tone touched Jessamy to a softer mood.

"Why should I be angry with you? We must both be free to go our own ways, I suppose, and to do what we think best. If you thought it best to go to see Claire and believe in her lies ——"

"Jessamy!"

Yule was on his knees beside her, tightly holding the nervously fluttering hands in his own. Jessamy looked at him in surprise.

"Jessamy, you are so sweet, so beautiful, that I can't bear to have you thinking these hideous things. . . . Don't, dear. It isn't worthy of you."

"Worthy of me?" she echoed. Here he was talking that high-flown unknown language again! . . . But

the worst of it was that he was perfectly honest, perfectly sincere. One couldn't pull one's hand away and laugh at him. He would be horribly hurt. Besides . . . wasn't it rather cheap to laugh at ideals, such as his, even though one knew that one couldn't possibly attain to them? One was too apt to call everything sentimental that was a little off the beaten track of the realities. . . . Realities? What were they, if one came to think of it? Physical enjoyment, the Arts, Love. . . . Were those the only realities, after all? . . . Had this queer man got hold of something which she, in her cultured, moneyed, leisured life, had missed? . . . "Yule, I don't understand you."

"How could you?" he said humbly. "I am only a clod beside your finer clay. But that's why I hate to see you muffing any of your possibilities, why it jars so frightfully to think that you, in your purity, should think evil of another woman."

There was a long pause in which Jessamy's hand fluttered like a little bird under Yule's.

"I wonder if you're right," said the girl at last. "About Claire, I mean? . . . Could I possibly have misunderstood? . . . Oh, but I didn't. I couldn't. . . . No, Yule, no. I can't believe that I was mistaken."

Her easy use of his name touched Yule with a sense of sweetest intimacy. How was he to know how freely Christian names were bandied about in the set to which Jessamy had so recently belonged and from which she now desired such an absolute severance? Greatly daring, he lifted one of her restless hands and laid it gently against his cheek. It was enough for him that Jessamy suffered it. Response he did not hope for as yet, but it was something that it lay quietly against his clean-shaven skin.

"You'll believe it some day," he answered gently.

The back of her hand was like satin, the mere touch

of it on his cheek a caress. He closed his eyes for an instant to savour the ecstasy of the contact.

Jessamy looked at his rapt face with a mingling of feelings, apprehension, annoyance, shame.

"When will that be?" she asked with a little frown.

"When you've found out for yourself the things that really matter."

"What are they?"

Yule opened his eyes, her hand still against his cheek, only half willingly, though he did not realize that or he would have let it go at once.

"Kindness, courage, honesty, I think. Don't you agree?"

"I'm afraid I haven't thought about it," Jessamy admitted.

"You'll never begin younger." Yule smiled at her, slid her hand round to his lips and kissed it lightly. "But we've each got to work out these things for ourselves, haven't we? . . . And anyhow, we're starting straight now, you and I."

"Yes," answered Jessamy rather low.

She made a slight movement of the hand he held, and Yule released it instantly.

"Look here," he blurted out, reddening. "I — my touch isn't repugnant to you, is it?"

"Oh, no, no," cried Jessamy in swift confusion. "I — didn't mean. . . . My arm was getting rather cramped. . . . That was all." On an impulse she held her other hand out to him.

He took it in his, pressed a kiss upon its palm and laid it down on the bed again.

"That's all right, dear," he half whispered. "You needn't be afraid of my trespassing, ever."

"Oh, but I'm not," Jessamy thrust in. "And as we're on the subject, and we may not want to be so serious again, I must just say this. That I don't see why we shouldn't make quite a decent thing out of this un-

conventional marriage of ours. People are such slaves to convention that they think that any move from the beaten track must be wrong and fore-doomed to failure. You and I are — are sensible people. We've had our — our experiences. We know something of life and — and don't expect too much ——"

"But that's all wrong," interrupted Yule. "Those who expect nothing will get nothing. That's not the right attitude at all. 'Great Hopes gold-armoured' must be yours and mine. If we go forward together with kindness and courage and honesty, we're bound to meet them at last."

Jessamy shook her head.

"I have no hopes, gold-armoured or otherwise," she answered, her momentary eagerness clouded.

Yule regarded her with a funny little smile in his eyes.

"Don't tell me that you live in that grey world where there's only 'an infinite twilight of content with nothing more to lose'?"

"Oh, but I do. That's just it. How do you know? Do you live there, too?" All the deliberate pessimism of her youth responded eagerly to the suggestion.

"Not a bit of it," cried Yule. "Nor you either. The dustman may, for all I care, for I pitched that mawkish philosophy into the dustbin for him. You've heaps more to lose and so have I."

"But what?" asked Jessamy, wide-eyed.

"Youth, health, sight, friends, lots of things."

"I haven't any friends . . . now."

"Base ingrate! What about Nanetty and me? Aren't we your friends?"

"The best a girl ever had, I think," murmured Jessamy, with a little deprecating look. "You mustn't think me ungrateful, for I'm not."

"Gratitude's a niggard word which must never be used between you and me," said Yule. "What's mine is yours. Remember that. . . . And as we're never

going to be serious again"—he looked at her half whimsically, half anxiously—"here's my wedding wish for you, written by a wiser than I for a dear friend's birthday." He paused.

"Tell me," said Jessamy pricked with a desire to be friendly. More of his unknown language, she supposed . . . more of the ideals to which she could never attain. Queer, old-world person, with his dreams and whimsies, his clean outlook on life and his odd ideas about everything. . . . What was he going to say now, she wondered.

"It's a secret," he answered. "Not even Nanetty knows — yet. . . . But I'm going to make a little book of it, and now that you've come, it shall be yours — all about you. You shall be on every page of it if only — if only I can ever succeed in drawing you."

"But you haven't even tried yet."

"I tried half last night," Yule answered simply. "And in the end I tore up every sketch I'd made."

"Try next time when I'm there," Jessamy suggested. "Perhaps you'll have better luck. But weren't you going to tell me the wish?"

Yule hesitated, held by that reticence that makes it so hard for the Englishman to voice his deeper feelings. Then he began in a low tone, which grew fuller and more vibrant in feeling as he forgot self in what he was wishing for the one beloved: those happy thoughts wrapped in beautiful words by Ruskin, that lover of jewelled prose:

"Every year some new love of lovely things, and some new forgetfulness of the teasing things and some higher pride in the praising things, and some sweeter peace from the hurrying things and some closer fence from the worrying things. And longer stay of time when you are happy and lighter flight of days that are unkind."

Silence fell when he stopped. Some emotion stronger than himself gripped him. He could not have spoken if he would; he would not if he could: for what love urged

him to say might not yet be put into words. He could only live it, and hope for an ultimate understanding one day.

"That's beautiful," murmured Jessamy, touched to speech at last by the awkwardness of the silence. Emotion to which she could not respond made her feel gauche and uncomfortable. Yet Amber's sincerity touched her and she searched her numbed mind for some answer that would please him. Finally she ventured: "Part of your wish has come true already, I think."

"What's that?" Yule came back to earth faintly expectant.

"The 'closer fence from worrying things,'" replied the girl shyly. "You're that, you know."

"Am I?" said Yule, flushing with pleasure. "I want to be, God knows."

"As for the new love of lovely things——" she stopped abruptly. . . . Wasn't it she who had purposed to teach that herself to Yule? . . . She felt an unwonted humility. "I believe we do speak the same language after all." Her thought uttered itself almost without her own volition: against wish or desire. For how *could* they speak the same language, this strange man and herself?

"Of course we do," said Yule joyously.

Then he swung round and left the room without another word. He felt that he could not trust himself further.

IV

In the kitchen, Mrs. Daylight, burning with curiosity about this hasty, unheralded marriage, was endeavouring to discuss the situation with Nanetty.

She was a brisk capable little woman of nondescript colouring. Her proudest possession was a very new set of gleaming false teeth, which Yule declared must own at least half-a-dozen more than the allotted number: her

most salient characteristic a permanent droop in her left eyelid which imparted to an otherwise commonplace face an expression of extreme knowingness.

"I can't compliment pore Mr. Nimmo's housekeeper on the way she left things, miss," Mrs. Daylight was saying. "Many's the day since them shelves was scrubbed down. They're fit now for anything. I'll put up the china on 'em if you'll tell me where wot's to go."

"Put the things wherever it's most convenient for you, Mrs. Daylight. The old china — well, Mrs. Amber must decide herself where she wants that to go."

Mrs. Daylight cocked her head on one side, pouncing upon the heaven-sent opportunity.

"A suddint sort of marriage that, Miss Cotes, wasn't it?"

Nanetty managed a non-committal smile.

"Don't they say 'happy's the wooing that's not long a-doing,' Mrs. Daylight?"

"Yes, miss, but they also say 'Marry in haste and repent at leisure.' It remains to be seen which of them two is right. . . . Had Mr. h'Amber known the young lady long?"

"Long enough for them to get married yesterday," returned Nanetty, putting a row of tumblers up on the dresser, and turning towards the stacked plates.

Mrs. Daylight, who had the rare faculty of being able to work while she talked, pursued her theme further: "Not that it matters much in the h'end whether you knows a person long or short. Marriage is a lucky-bag, so it is. Once you puts your 'and in you 'as to keep wot you draws out. Many a one, metabolically speaking, as pore Mr. h'Amber is so fond of saying, would wish in their 'earts as they'd bin able to take a peep h'inside the bag first. They'd 'a' dropped wot they 'eld like 'ot potatoes, so they would, I'm thinking. But there, miss, it h'all comes to the same thing in the h'end. You gets used to wot you 'as, don't you?"

"I expect so," answered Nanetty absently.

She had heard the opening of Jessamy's door upstairs and the careful sound of Yule's descending footsteps. The next moment he had come into the kitchen with the breakfast-tray, which he put down on the table.

The two women turned round from their work, regarding him very differently. Mrs. Daylight's flashing smile and simulated wink denoted a sly sympathy with the newly-made bridegroom, for whom she had a genuine liking in spite, or perhaps because of, his "queerness."

Nanetty's look was more difficult to read. Indeed, it would have been impossible for herself even to disentangle the various emotions that warred within her, so complex, so contradictory were they. It was to her Yule turned after his morning greeting to the promoted charwoman.

"What can I do for you next, Nanetty?" he asked. "I shall be ready to act handy-man in a few minutes. I've just got to go back to Jessamy for a moment first."

It pricked Nanetty like a nettle-sting to hear his voice soften at each utterance of the girl's name: not with the ordinary jealousy that stings and burns, but with a more complicated feeling which deprecated and deplored the unmeaning suddenness of Yule's infatuation. The instantaneousness of the whole thing precluded, to her mind, any genuine or abiding love. To her, love was a blossom of slow growth which unfolded gradually from bud to flower with due inevitability, neither hasting nor resting until the beautiful climax was reached. This almost magical efflorescence had something impermanent about it. That which had blossomed as swiftly as a cactus-bloom must surely wither with the same disconcerting suddenness. She could not be happy in this baseless, evanescent happiness of Yule's, so pitifully apparent in his eyes and voice.

"Arrange your books," she said. "Mrs. Daylight and I are busy here. The sitting-rooms must wait till Jessamy sees them."

"Reelly, Mr. h'Amber," suggested Mrs. Daylight, "the best thing you could do would be to take yourself and your young lady h'out of the 'ouse for the day, and let me and Miss Cotes get straight 'ere. H'indeed, why you're not the both of you h'off on a proper 'oneymoon, h'I can't imagine!"

"Don't be so conventional, my 'pure Daylight of honest speech,'" returned Amber with a twinkle. "Don't you know that honeymoons have gone completely out of fashion? Mrs. Amber and I are going to feed on honeydew and drink the milk of Paradise here in Caroline Place, and you shall be our Ganymede if you will."

"Ganymede indeed!" scoffed Mrs. Daylight, regarding Yule fondly. "And wot sort of an 'eathen 'ussy might she 'ave been, Mr. h'Amber? I take it you're speaking metabolically as usual, sir?"

"Metabolically, diabolically or hyperbolically, it's all the same. Ganymede was cup-bearer to the gods, Mrs. Daylight. A high office."

"Which means, I suppose, as you'd like a cup o' coffee after your dinner," said Mrs. Daylight, who knew Amber's preferences almost as well as Nanetty did by this time.

"Please," he smiled. Then he turned to his cousin. "Don't kill yourself, old thing. I'll be back in a minute."

He was gone. The two women listened to his footsteps hastening eagerly up the kitchen stairs. Mrs. Daylight even went to the door and looked after his retreating form with what Nanetty could only call a leer of sympathy, deepened to acuteness by the knowing droop of her left eyelid.

The door upstairs opened and shut. Nanetty pushed dinner-plates into their places on the dresser with a little clatter. Mrs. Daylight began to wash up Jessamy's belated breakfast things with an indulgent smile.

"Well, well, Mr. h'Amber's a very h'unusual gentleman," she mused. "Bless 'is 'eart and give 'im an

'appy h'issue h'out h'of h'all 'is h'afflictions, h'as the Bible says. . . . Young Mrs. h'Amber seems to be a reel lady, Miss Cotes, not like you and me who works with our 'ands. Staying in bed for 'er breakfast an' that sort of thing."

"Mrs. Amber isn't very strong and has had a good deal of trouble lately," Nanetty explained.

"That's why Mr. h'Amber sleeps in the little room, h'isn't it?"

"Yes."

"Ah, it won't be for long, please Gawd," rejoined Mrs. Daylight heartily. She was plunging into indelicate aspirations regarding Mrs. Amber's future state of health when Nanetty stopped her with an abrupt: "I think I'd better go out and do some marketing now. We haven't got enough in the house to carry us over the week-end. I'm only responsible till Monday, Mrs. Daylight. From then on you'll take your orders from Mrs. Amber. She's not very experienced, I fancy, so we'll both have to help her as much as we can."

"That'll mean 'er taking 'er orders from me, metabolically speaking," said Mrs. Daylight cheerfully. "Well, that's h'all for the best. *You* know I'm honest, Miss Cotes. I 'aven't got no nest to feather nor no young birds to feed, like some I could mention. We'll soon shake down, never you fear."

"Shake down?" thought Nanetty as she toiled up the stairs to her attic. "It will take some time to shake down after such an upheaval."

V

When Jessamy had unpacked her trunks and put away the personal belongings which Mrs. Wyatt had sent her through Mr. Heppel, she took a more critical stock of her surroundings than she had done hitherto.

The room she had slept in was a large and pleasant one,

with two windows opening on to a narrow iron balcony and looking across the road to the river. She walked over to the nearest one.

The view held her for a moment. There was but an intermittent traffic past Caroline Place. Now a taxi-cab purred by, now a motor-van or bread-cart rumbled past. Sparrows chattered in the plane-trees on the opposite pavement. A brisk wind whipped the river to a steely brightness, which was now barred by a tug towing a string of black hulking lighters upstream.

From the house next door a small procession suddenly poured forth; a baby and a two-year-old in a capacious perambulator pushed by a worried-looking nurse-maid, who cast an anxious eye behind her at the antics of two older children who were having a jumping race down the short flight of steps which led up to each hall-door in Caroline Place.

Jessamy watched them until the procession had concentrated and safely convoyed itself across the road. She was going to turn away when another movement down below caught her eye. A thin young woman with rather untidy fair hair rushed out of the house next door, a feeding-bottle in her hand.

"Gladys!" she called. "You've forgotten baby's bottle."

She ran across the road and tucked the bottle under the perambulator rug, kissed the sleeping baby and the two-year-old and was leaped upon by the other children, who demanded kisses also before she turned to go.

Breathless and laughing she patted and pushed them on their way, gave some last instructions to the nurse-maid and crossed the road again, smoothing back the stray locks of her hair as she went. She had a pleasant, rather careworn face, Jessamy thought, as she watched the little scene with quite an impersonal sense of detachment.

She seemed to be living two lives just then: the inner,

hidden life, where all that she had ever known had failed her, leaving an incessant dull ache behind, and the outer new one through which she walked as in a dream, apparently normal, doing all the expected things in quite ordinary fashion, in spite of the queer unreality of everything.

When the next-door lady had reached the pavement a stout opulent-looking woman joined and greeted her. Fragments of their conversation floated up to Jessamy through the open window.

". . . moved in yesterday . . . a bride, did you hear?"

". . . Nice for le P'tit to have another gentleman for bridge. . . . You and I. . . . My poor husband preferred games of chance, roulette, *les p'tits chevaux* . . ."

". . . wish there were children . . . play with."

A comfortable chuckle and a "Come, my dear, give them time. . . . *Tout vient*, you know ——" awoke Jessamy to the awkward realization that the new inhabitants of No. 1 formed the subject of discussion.

Blushing hotly she withdrew, hoping that these talkative new neighbours of hers had not seen her at the window.

Still hot and uncomfortable she surveyed the room with its used washstand and tumbled bedclothes. The walls were covered with an old-fashioned paper — roses clambering over a faded green trellis. It suited the old mahogany furniture: the great wardrobe with its centre mirror, the marble-topped, claw-legged washstand, the bow-fronted chest of drawers, the big four-post bed, the chairs with their high carved backs.

"New curtains and chair covers. Nothing else," Jessamy decided quickly. "It would spoil this room to modernize it. I believe I'll be able to get a chintz that will go with the bed curtains. . . . Delicious things!" she glanced at the bed. "The whole room is like an

illustration to Jane Austen. But I'm not going to live in a Jane Austen novel. I'm of to-day, so the rest of the house must be of to-day also. After all, we're living in to-day, so why the pretence of a pseudo-period? A harmonious mixture, that's what I want. . . . These good people have got to be livened up. I'm quite willing to adapt myself partly to their ways if they'll be equally willing to adapt themselves partly to mine. They thought the other house hideous. So it was. This is much better, quite livable-in. The other was impossible." Jessamy gave a little shudder of distaste. "Well, they thought so, too. That's a sign of grace. I wonder ——"

A firm rapping at the door made her turn her head sharply.

"What on earth does he want now?" she thought with exasperation as she said "Come in."

It was not her husband who entered. It was a brisk little woman in a check overall who regarded her with interest from beneath her drooping lid as she gave her a friendly "Good morning, mum."

"Oh — good morning," answered Jessamy, rather taken aback. "Who are you and what do you want?"

"I'm Mrs. Daylight, mum. I used to char at Radnor Crescent, but I'm going to live in here and do for you all." She flashed two rows of gleaming teeth at Jessamy, of whose looks, at any rate, she quite approved.

Certainly the girl lived up to her ideal of "a reel lady" in her simple little mole-colour frock with its clever touches of rust and amber and brown embroidery. Those hands, too, white and pink-tipped, looked sufficiently pretty and useless to prove her previous assertion.

"I shall call you Daylight, then," began Jessamy. "I'm used to ——" she stopped abruptly.

"You may call me h'anything you like so long as it isn't Nightlight," beamed Mrs. Daylight. "For them's

things I can't abide. Mr. h'Amber calls me h'all sorts of queer names."

Mrs. Daylight had been housemaid in what she called "a good 'ouse" in her early youth, and she knew that it was the smart thing to call the upper servants by their surnames: so that Jessamy's curt decision did not in any way offend her dignity.

"I made sure you'd be ready for me to do h'out your room, mum. I want to get it done before I tackles the dinner. No wish to 'urry you, but ——" she paused significantly.

"I'm quite ready," Jessamy returned, picking up a handkerchief and tucking it into her sleeve. "Where is — where are ——?"

"Miss Cotes 'as gone out and Mr. h'Amber is settling 'is books in the dining-room."

"Thank you."

Mrs. Daylight cast an appraising eye at the pretty litter on her new mistress's dressing-table.

"She've been used to a maid of 'er own, it's h'easily seen. We'll 'ave to get a girl if she h'expects lady's maiding 'ere. Never done a 'and's turn for 'erself in 'er life, I'll be bound. A reel lady, as ever is!"

Meanwhile Jessamy left the shelter of her room and took her first conscious steps in her new domain. Last evening she had been aware of nothing but her own intense fatigue and the overwhelming reaction after the strain she had undergone. Today her vitality reasserted itself.

The door of the room next hers was open. It had evidently been hastily arranged as a bedroom, for she caught a glimpse of a camp bedstead and makeshift furniture. It was small and narrow, with one window which looked out on the river, as hers did. The room behind her own was larger and was furnished as a dressing-room. It looked out on a narrow strip of garden at the back. Behind it again were a bathroom and

linen cupboard. Downstairs were the dining-room and drawing-room, she imagined, approximating to the rooms upstairs. Another flight of stairs led up to what she assumed were the attics, where Nanetty must sleep. The best and largest room had been allotted to her. . . . They *were* decent to her, anyhow, she thought.

She went downstairs and pushed open the dining-room door. Yule was on his knees beside a bookcase in one corner, unpacking a box of books which the packers had not had time to open yesterday.

He sprang to his feet when he saw her. He was hot and his hair untidy. A streak of dust barred his chin. He pulled forward an old leather-covered chair for Jessamy.

"Come and take stock of your kingdom," he said eagerly.

Her great eyes held a spark of interest as she nodded and looked round her.

"I'm afraid all this is too ugly and shabby for you," he deprecated. "You must have things to suit you, of course. One's surroundings make such an enormous difference, don't they?"

Jessamy nodded again. "I've just been making the acquaintance of your factotum, Daylight. *How* many teeth has she? I counted at least fifty-six!"

Yule burst into delighted laughter. "I always tell Nanetty that Mrs. Daylight has got at least a set and a half."

Jessamy laughed too. The similarity of their silly jests set an answering chord vibrating somewhere in each. There are few bonds more powerful than a similarity of taste in jokes, feeble or otherwise.

"Not that I mind false teeth," Jessamy said, showing an excellent natural set of her own. "I think they give a person rather a kind look, but ——"

"Exactly," said Yule, laughing again. "One may have too much of a good thing, just as people are known

to have been killed with kindness. . . . But what about this room? What do you think of it? Can it be made at all possible?"

Jessamy looked at the grey-green walls and the magenta repp curtains and chair-covers. The pictures were large and overpowering: Victorian engravings at their ugliest manifestation. The furniture was plain and solid: useful but inoffensive.

"The furniture's all right, in its way," she pronounced. "But the best thing you can do with the pictures and curtains is to make a bonfire of them. They are appalling."

"Yes, aren't they?" said Yule ruefully.

"Why not sell them and use the proceeds for getting new ones?" asked Nanetty's voice behind them.

She stood in the doorway, laden with parcels. She looked worn and tired. Her old grey felt hat hid all her radiant hair and accentuated the sharp plainness of her face. Yule turned swiftly and went to take her burden from her.

"Why did you sneak off without telling me, old thing?" he asked. "I could at least have carried these heavy parcels for you and I wasn't doing much good here."

"What have you been buying?" asked Jessamy, a little annoyed at the interruption.

She rather fancied herself as a house-decorator, and she had just embarked on a scheme which was to effect the maximum of transformation with the minimum of cost: at least, the question of economy had not really obtruded itself into her calculations until Nanetty's practical suggestion had reminded her of its necessity.

"Honeydew and milk of Paradise for your dinner," Nanetty answered, a rather sharp tang in her tone. "That's what you ordered, Yule, wasn't it?"

"Certainly," he answered, reddening a little. Then he looked across at Jessamy and smiled as if to make

amends for his cousin's brusquerie. "It would be that in any case, though."

Jessamy smiled perfunctorily in return. She did not understand the little passage at arms, though she was sufficiently sensitive to realize the pull of some undercurrent beneath the light flow of words.

"Can we go shopping this afternoon?" she asked. "Those curtains and chair-covers make me feel physically ill. The pictures, of course, can come down at once."

She jumped up on a chair and laid hold of the nearest light maple frame.

"Let me do that," cried Yule, lifting her down and taking her place. "What shall we put on the walls instead? Etchings? Japanese prints?"

Jessamy gasped a little at his unexpected action.

"Which have you got?" she asked practically.

"Neither, I'm afraid."

"Etchings would be best, but the good ones are frightfully dear, aren't they?"

"I'm afraid so. I've never been able to afford them."

"You won't be able to afford them now, either," Nanetty reminded him. "You must remember that five hundred a year isn't inexhaustible, Yule, and that it's far more important to buy a decent set of aluminum ware for the kitchen than etchings for the dining-room."

"Philistine!" cried Yule. "Mustn't our souls be fed as well as our bodies? Man does not live by bread alone!"

"No, but he can't live without it ——"

"And this room could be quite easily adapted to a scheme which I've always wanted to carry out," said Jessamy musingly. "A mignonette room, cream, grey-green, and pale red. The walls are just right as they are and we could get the other colours in the curtains and pictures ——"

"Pictures?" cried Nanetty suddenly. "Wait a min-

ute. I think I have just what you want! It shall be my wedding-present to you if you like it."

She dropped the last of her parcels on the dining-room table and hurried out of the room, forgetting her fatigue in a little pang of remorse for her churlishness. . . . Why was she so cross? Why wasn't she helping Yule as she had vowed to do, instead of snapping at him as she had done? Why was human nature so despicably weak? Why couldn't one always live up to one's best instead of sinking so readily to one's worst? . . . These thoughts companioned her like a cloud of gnats as she hurried up to her attic studio.

When she had gone Yule turned to Jessamy.

"Nanetty's bark is worse than her bite, but her heart is warmer than she pretends," he said.

Jessamy made a little face. "I was afraid you were going to say it was of gold."

"Well, it is," said Yule smiling. "Life itself is full of *clichés,* Jessamy. We can't escape them."

"That would be too much to expect, I suppose."

Silence fell for a moment before Nanetty returned, some rather dusty canvases under each arm.

"These are some copies I did for my own pleasure before I sold my soul to old Brand," she said rather breathlessly, laying them down face upwards on the table.

Some were excellent copies of Dutch interiors. One, an old woman peeling onions into a red earthenware bowl, was full of the colour that Jessamy desired. She pounced on it at once.

"But these are charming," she cried, in swift surprise. "Did you do them?" She looked at Nanetty with dawning respect.

"Yes, but they're only copies."

"What matter? They're awfully well done."

Yule looked from one to the other proudly. He longed more than words could say for a rapport between these two dear women whom he loved so differently.

"Isn't this a delightful thing?" he said, pulling forward a study of old red-brown houses at a street corner.

Jessamy bent over it, then glanced up with a look of surprise. "But I know this quite well. My father bought the original. It's in the library at Tudor Lodge."

Nanetty laughed shortly. "You must be making a mistake. Your father must have bought a copy. The original is in Lady Havant's house in St. James's Square. I got special permission to copy it."

"I'm sure I'm not making a mistake. I'm quite certain that Dad bought the original. He was so proud of it. His real old Dutch, he used to call it," Jessamy persisted.

"I assure you that the original picture belongs to Lady Havant," said Nanetty shortly.

Jessamy opened her lips as if to speak, then closed them again and gave her shoulders a little shrug, as if to dismiss the subject. She knew quite well that she was right, but she was not going to pursue an acrimonious argument which could lead to nothing, as each protagonist was firmly convinced that she was right and the other wrong.

"I loved those old houses so much that I did one copy for old Brand and another for myself. Perhaps your father bought my copy from old Brand," Nanetty suggested.

"Who is old Brand?"

"He runs the Leyden Gallery in Kensington. I — copy pictures for him, principally Italian Primitives and Dutch interiors. He finds a ready sale for them, he tells me."

"I don't know anything about old Brand or the Leyden Gallery, nor do I know where Dad bought that picture. He picked it up, he said. He was firmly convinced that it was an original." Jessamy's lips set themselves obstinately.

"It's a common delusion amongst owners of pictures,"

returned Nanetty dryly. Then she turned to the canvases on the table. "How many of these would you like, or do you care for any?"

"I'd love them all," cried Jessamy warmly. "But that would be too greedy. Would it be too much if I took three — these two interiors and that one of the canal with the woman scrubbing her copper pots on the steps? They have just the colouring I want."

"Not the old houses?"

"Of course not that one, Nanetty," cried Yule, amazed at his cousin's tactlessness. "Jessamy doesn't want to be reminded ——"

"Sorry," interposed Nanetty gruffly, reaching out her long arms and gathering up the discarded pictures. "Well, those three shall be my wedding present to you and Yule. If you take down those eyesores they can be stacked in there under the pantry shelf until we find some dealer misguided enough to buy them. I think I know a man who goes in for that early Victorian stuff."

"Good," said Yule. "Thank you most awfully, old thing. I'll see about getting those pictures framed this very day."

"Yes, and we can also hunt for something to cover those chairs with, immediately after lunch," said Jessamy eagerly. "Look! the bottoms slide out. You could nail the stuff on quite easily, Yule, couldn't you?"

"Absolutely."

"Don't forget that it's Saturday and that most of the shops will be shut," Nanetty reminded them as she left the room.

Jessamy's face fell. She looked as crestfallen as a child who is suddenly deprived of a new toy. It hurt Yule to see her disappointment. . . . Why need Nanetty have thrust her blunt practicality across their plans? . . . He sought hastily for reassurance.

"I don't believe the Chelsea shops shut on Saturday," he declared stoutly. "Chelsea is a village, remember.

We're bound to find a picture-framer's open anyhow. . . . Would you like those dull flat gold frames? And we'll hunt up some one who sells plain net curtains, which we can put up temporarily instead of those atrocities. What do you say?"

"I say that you are really rather nice," returned Jessamy unexpectedly.

Yule's heart leaped as if he had received an accolade, though all he said was a quick, shy: "I'm glad you think so!"

VI

THERE followed for Jessamy Amber a period which, had she owned sufficient mental detachment to enable her to analyze it, she would have found to contain many of the component parts of happiness. She had recovered from the first effects of her shock. She was young, alert, alive, in spite of the numb inner ache which still companioned her. Her days were full and busy: almost too busy for thought.

She really enjoyed the processes of house renovation, which called upon resources which had never been tapped in her before. With unconscious wisdom she left Mrs. Daylight practically to her own devices. That astute lady knew how to humour her new mistress, and as she was really a capable woman, the domestic wheels revolved fairly smoothly.

Nanetty, busy with her painting, kept to her attics as much as possible, not always even appearing at meals. Her system of withdrawal was the best policy at present for the newly-married couple, she felt. They did not want her, nor she them.

There were few drastic alterations required at No. 1, Caroline Place, much to her relief; for neither Yule nor Jessamy seemed to apprehend the real value of money where their artistic necessities were concerned. All the

woodwork in the house had been painted a dark oak-brown by Henry Nimmo's instructions. This paint, having had no ill-usage, was still in excellent order.

The drawing-room had been used only on Sundays by the old man himself, who had not altered the late tenant's decorations of grey distempered walls and white frieze and mouldings. Here he had hung his mother's curtains of old-gold damask which Jessamy declared delightedly to be "the absolutely right thing." The carpet had faded to a medley of soft colours. The furniture needed only weeding and re-arranging to her own taste.

"The room would be perfect if only I had my own special things in it," she said one afternoon. "My old Boule writing-desk that Dad gave me and some water-colours that I loved. A particular chair or two."

"Why don't you write and ask Mrs. Wyatt to send them to you?" Yule asked, adding hastily: "Not direct, of course, but through Mr. Heppel, as she did with your trunks? . . . Have you ever answered her letter, by the way?"

Jessamy reddened. "No. There was nothing to answer in it. Nothing I could say, I mean, unless I made up my mind to confess that I was mistaken and wished to — to open up relations with her again. I don't want to do that. I can't do it."

Yule was silent for a moment. His silences always seemed accusatory to Jessamy, though nothing was farther from his intention. They had reached a certain surface intimacy in their relations, but it was a case of "Thus far and no farther." An angel with a flaming sword barred the way to anything closer. At times the strain fretted Yule's nerves, but Jessamy was not to know that. For her, life held a certain ease, a certain pleasantness which she had not known hitherto. There were none of the fears and tremors, the passions, the exaltations of her intercourse with Lucas Grote. She could

laugh and talk with Yule Amber as she had never laughed and talked with him. He had been too fierce, too possessive a lover for the cooler interludes of real conversation, that pleasant friction of mind against mind which polishes companionship to the ultimate jewel of understanding.

At last Yule said: "It wouldn't hurt you to forgive her, Jessamy, even if you do believe the worst of her. I don't know what she said to you in her letter, but ——"

Jessamy's eyes flashed. "Palaver! Nothing but palaver. Wounded feelings, hurt amazement at my attitude, disappointment at my hopeless misunderstanding. . . . Tosh!"

"Jessamy, she swore on her honour to me ——"

"On her honour? . . . Did she really? You didn't tell me that before." Jessamy's breath quickened.

"Didn't I? I thought I did. I'm almost sure I did."

"No. You didn't." Jessamy paused, visibly shaken. "Even Claire would scarcely ——"

"Don't say 'even Claire' like that."

"Why, Yule, I believe you're half in love with her yourself!" cried Jessamy with a scornful little laugh.

Yule stared at her, speechless, his face suddenly suffused with anger.

"How dare you?" he cried fiercely. "How dare you ——" and then stopped, choked by his own sudden fury.

How could she have said such a thing, much less thought it? She, to whom he had given everything that she would let him give and much which she never even suspected! He turned abruptly to the window. He could not trust himself to speak.

Jessamy looked at his stiffened back half in dismay, half in amusement. She did not understand his sudden anger. What had there been to annoy him so much in her silly laughing suggestion? . . . And they had been getting on so nicely, too! She had just begun to

flatter herself that their rash experiment was turning out quite a success. Convention had not picked up the glove thrown so defiantly at her feet. They had not been so rash in their challenge, after all. They were stronger than she. . . . But now ——

It was on this sharp-edged silence that Mrs. Daylight opened the door and, flinging it wide in what she considered the correct manner, announced:

"Mrs. Chalfont-Smy —!"

VII

Into the room and across the silence sailed Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe, with outstretched white-gloved hand and air of friendly patronage.

"I thought that it was kinder to let you alone until you were quite settled, Mrs. Amber," she said graciously. "Still, even in this unconventional age *les convenances* must be observed, mustn't they?"

"Oh, quite," murmured Jessamy, recovering her poise with an effort. "Have you met my — my husband, Mrs. Smythe — Mr. Amber?"

"I have not yet had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Amber though I sometimes saw him in Caroline Place in poor old Mr. Nimmo's day. A devoted nephew, I must say." Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe beamed at Yule in his turn.

He murmured deprecatingly, "Cousin," as he placed a chair for her.

Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe looked round her with undisguised interest, ignoring his correction.

"How you have transformed this room!" she exclaimed. "Poor Mr. Nimmo! . . . A man's room, you know. . . . But now it is more like what it was in Mrs. Tudor's day."

*"Mrs. Tudor?" queried Jessamy politely.

* See the Author's earlier novel, "Drifting Waters."

"She lived here with her young daughter, Anne, before Mr. Nimmo bought the house. Lived and died here, I may say. . . . Ah, she was a romantic, mysterious figure. Exclusive. Very much the *grande dame!* What a manner! What an air! . . . Anne was a strange, interesting-looking child, but not a patch on her mother. A sad history, poor dear!" Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe nodded her smart toque sympathetically, though she had known no more of the late Mrs. Tudor's history than the rest of the outer world: which was but little.

"That sounds intriguing," said Jessamy, rising like a child to the bait of a story.

"Quite the word to suit poor dear Mrs. Tudor. *She* was intriguing, if you like, in the French sense, of course. She always reminded me rather of the pictures du Maurier used to draw in 'Punch' long ago, she was so tall, so aristocratic-looking — a word which has ceased to have meaning now-a-days, I fear. M. du Savenay, a dear friend of mine, who spent his last days in my house, was a great admirer of hers also. Another of the aristocrats, of the old French *noblesse,* you know — fallen on evil days." She sighed heavily, and shook her head. "*Quel dommage!* . . . He died, of a broken heart, I think, shortly after Mrs. Tudor's death."

"But what was Mrs. Tudor's history?" asked Jessamy, more from a desire to promote conversation than from any real curiosity.

"Ah, my dear Mrs. Amber, let the grave keep its secrets. I mustn't divulge hers, poor dear."

From Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe's melancholy, secretive manner one would never have guessed that she had no more than the general surface knowledge of the dead woman's affairs. Jessamy felt as if she had perhaps been rather intrusive, but some faint instinctive feeling of antagonism made her determine not to lower her crest before this ample, self-satisfied lady.

"What became of the daughter?" she pursued.

"Ah, dear Anne! . . . She married a sort of family connection, a Dr. Assheton. They live in Egypt now, I believe. Anne had quite a fortune of her own. They are doing very well, I hear, and have two or three children."

"How many children has the lady next door?" asked Jessamy, just saving herself from saying "woman"; a term which, she felt sure, would have sounded offensive to Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe's refined ears.

"Mrs. Waldron, you mean? Six," Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe answered. "Two go to a day school. The others aren't old enough yet."

"They are jolly kiddies," said Yule. "I've made friends with half-a-dozen or so of them already."

"But, my dear Mr. Amber, there *are* only six of them altogether!"

Yule laughed and Jessamy hastily interposed:

"You mustn't mind my husband. He always exaggerates frightfully."

The quickened look in Yule's face at mention of the children next door stirred some vague feeling of uneasiness within her. He had never spoken of them before. She had not known whether children appealed to him or not. That side of their own personal question had never presented itself to her. But if Yule wanted children! . . .

"It was a little habit of my husband's also," Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe was saying. "But Percy is the soul of accuracy."

Yule cast a puzzled glance at Jessamy. The good lady continued: "That is what makes him such a good bridge-player. Do you and your husband play, Mrs. Amber?"

"I do. Do you, Yule?"

"Yes, I like a game occasionally."

"Then you must come in some evening for a rubber with me. Quite quietly, you know. We occasionally

have the Waldrons in, but Mrs. Waldron isn't much use. Too much of the Martha, you know."

"No wonder, with six babies to make and mend for," said Yule, again with that look that had pricked Jessamy.

"They are not *all* babies, Mr. Amber," explained Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe patiently. "Nancy and Johnny are seven and nine."

"Quite venerable ages," smiled Yule.

"They certainly have more sense than the younger children. Mr. Smythe is very fond of them. He constantly brings them home sweets or fruit from the City. He always has a party for them on his birthday."

"How very kind of him!" said Jessamy.

"Ah, Percy has a heart of gold!" breathed Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe, smiling rather self-consciously, as if the credit were in some measure due to her.

Yule and Jessamy exchanged glances unperceived, mutual understanding once more restored. Then Yule said unexpectedly:

"If you want any one to help you to entertain the kiddies I should be delighted, Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe. I used to be able to do some simple conjuring tricks that might be useful, if my right hand hasn't forgotten its cunning."

"Many thanks, indeed, Mr. Amber. I'm sure it will be a great help to Percy, who gets very exhausted after these parties. We shall be charmed to see you and Mrs. Amber, too, if she cares to come. His birthday will be next month. I'll remind you more formally when the time draws nearer. May we count on you, too, Mrs. Amber?"

"I'm afraid I shouldn't be of much use," Jessamy demurred, urged by some contradictory impulse. "I don't know anything about children. I don't even know what to say to them."

"You'll never learn younger." Yule thrust his favour-

ite axiom at her with an eager, rather questioning glance, which she ignored.

Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe rose with the indulgent smile of a prospective Lucina, as who should say, "That knowledge will come of itself inevitably and in due course, my dear young people. *Tout vient,* you know ——"

"Then we may count at any rate on you, Mr. Amber, for what I always call le P'tit's *jour de fête?*"

"Le P'tit?" echoed Yule, wondering if she meant the plural.

Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe smiled deprecatingly and shook her head.

"I'm afraid that is my foolish little pet-name for Percy. He is small of stature, you know, but as I said before, he has a heart of gold."

"That's the main thing, isn't it?" Yule rejoined with a smile that completely won her good graces.

When her adieux had been said Yule saw her to the hall-door and then came back to where Jessamy was contemplating what were to her the blank spots in her drawing-room.

"There, behind the new Chesterfield, the writing-desk could go, and the Venetian Sketches Dad gave me would look just right on those grey walls." She looked up as Yule entered, her thoughts switched back once more to their visitor.

"Yule, isn't she priceless? . . . Have you ever seen le P'tit? I have. He is exactly like a pick-axe, all nose and sloping-back head and chin! Quite a good-looking pick-axe, I admit, but still a pick-axe, *tout court,* as Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe would be sure to say."

Yule went over and leaned on the back of her chair. "He has his points evidently."

"Yes. His nose is one of them," retorted Jessamy flippantly. "Do you mind moving away a little? It worries me to have you breathing down the back of my neck."

Yule's nearness did not really worry her. She was moved by a sudden impulse to try an experiment. She had once made a similar remark to Lucas Grote and in response he had merely stooped down and lifted her out of the chair into his arms.

"Worries you, does it? You little witch!" he had murmured. "It's good for you to be worried by me." Then he had kissed the back of her neck a dozen times before he let her go, declaring that her hair tickled him.

Yule just moved away quickly with a muttered "Sorry." By turning a little she could see the outline of a slightly reddened cheek-bone against the window. The sight half-hurt, half-annoyed her, and spurred her on to experiment still further.

"Yule, do you really like children, or were you only putting it on for Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe's benefit?"

Yule swung round to face her, more astonished than anything else at her implication.

"Really, Jessamy!" he said half laughing.

"Really what?" asked Jessamy provokingly.

"Do you think me such a hypocrite?"

"Then you really do like children?" said Jessamy slowly, leaving his accusatory question unanswered.

"Yes. I really do like children," he replied, turning back to the window again.

Two little girls were bowling hoops along the footpath by the river. The March wind had ripped the dead leaves of the plane-trees from the pavement to which the rain had stuck them and now whirled them before its sharp tonic breath, whisking scraps of paper and bits of straw across the road in a quick erratic dance. There was a stir of new life in the air, and more than a hint of Spring with its urge of the rising sap. Yule Amber moved restlessly.

"If you've nothing more for me to do here," he said, "I think I'll go out to the back garden and start some of the crazy paving."

Jessamy looked at him and away again. "There's nothing more to be done to this room until—unless I get my things from Tudor Lodge. Isn't that rather a funny coincidence, by the way? I came from Tudor Lodge to live here where Tudors lived before me! I wonder if there's any hidden connection?"

But Yule, always quick to follow a thread or anticipate a point, only answered abstractedly:

"Scarcely, I fancy, beyond the mere coincidence of names. . . . Will you come out and give me the benefit of your advice, or is it too cold for you?"

Jessamy jumped up. "Not a bit. I'll put on my fur coat. Next year we can have scillas and snowdrops growing up through the cracks in the pavement and different sorts of thyme that will smell deliciously when you tread on it, especially after rain. The minute the place is ready we must buy a bird bath. That needn't wait."

"No," Yule said. Next year? What would have happened by next year? He was suddenly aware of the stones and briars that beset his path. The steepness of the climb which he had set himself to accomplish. Per aspera ad astra! . . . Were the stars really there, after all? Were they but an illusion and only the rough road real? . . . "I'll fetch your fur coat for you."

He went quickly out of the room, leaving Jessamy to a whirl of contradictory thoughts and one piece of definite knowledge: the realization that here she had shut a door deliberately between Yule and something which he ardently desired: something which she ought to be ready to give him, but never would or could.

She wondered, with a sudden hot sense of resentment, if she would have liked Yule any better had he knocked down and trampled over the frail barrier that divided them and snatched her up to impose his own will on her, as Lucas Grote would undoubtedly have done.

With a quick revulsion she hid her burning face in her hands.

"No, no, no," she told herself. "I'd hate him! I'd hate him!"

Then, as in a lightning flash, she realized that it was only Yule's absolute honesty and chivalry which made their life together at all possible. She had flattered herself that it was she who had brought sweetness and light into his drab days. Now she saw that it was he who had brought it into hers: that it was he who, by a thousand unnamed, unnoticed reticences and delicacies, forbearances and trifling acts of thoughtfulness, was piling up a debt against her which she would never be able to pay.

For a moment she could almost have wished that Yule were brutal enough to ignore her defences, over-rule her puny defiance and take what was indubitably his right by force, so that she could feel less heavily indebted and own a legitimate grievance against him. But she stifled the ugly thought as he came once more into the room with her fur coat over his arm. Body and spirit alike rebelled.

"You could go to the Arctic regions in this, I believe," he said with a smile on his kind lips that blinded her to the sadness of his eyes.

"I was just wishing that I could hate you, Yule," she cried impulsively.

"Why?" he asked, astonished.

"Because then I shouldn't feel so mean," she answered, reddening. "I take all and give nothing."

His eyes brightened. He took a step towards her.

"Do you mean ——? Could you ——?"

"I don't mean anything," she answered hastily, regretting her impulse. She jumped up, went over to him and slipped her hand through his arm. "Come on and let's start the crazy paving. I'm pining to see how it looks."

"Come along then," said Yule. "You mustn't pine."

He took advantage of the necessary opening of the door to remove from his arm that light tantalizing pressure. Such close contact with her had already become more than he could bear.

VIII

It is axiomatic that love — Dan Chaucer's "sweete Hell and sorrowful Paradis"—never stands still. It grows with what it feeds upon, and to the successful lover the kissed finger-tip is but the prelude to the lips. But for the lover who gets neither lips nor finger-tips, whose garden of Paradise is walled round but by a spiritual barrier which he himself has erected, who is himself his own "fever and pain," the fire of his love is fanned inevitably to a veritable flame of his particular "sweete Hell," consuming, devouring.

Nanetty alone was conscious of the fever that fretted Yule Amber. She saw it with a feeling of helpless exasperation at her own impotence. . . . How was it that that foolish girl did not fall down at his feet and worship him? How was it that that idiotic Yule didn't take her by the shoulders and shake her into submission? She was of the type that needed bullying, Nanetty thought. If *she* were Yule she would try what catching Jessamy by the hair and dragging her round the back garden a few times would do!

Her lips curled at her own exaggerations. She and Yule were rather fond of clothing their thoughts a little extravagantly. It had often seemed to make up for their necessary bodily economies. She searched on her palette for a last touch of that clear rose-red which she had achieved for her Italian pictures after much experiment. She must finish this copy before she went down to supper. . . . Not a scrap was left. She would have to mix some more. What a nuisance!

She hastily squeezed out a little of each of the

necessary colours, anathematizing her own carelessness as she did so.

The light in the white-washed attic, with its sloping ceiling, was rapidly going. In the greenish sky a star or two already twinkled. The picture she was copying — a stiff little early Italian Madonna with angels — stood on an easel near the one at which she was working. She frowned as she bent to catch the last glimmer of the waning April twilight, painting in her final touches rapidly.

The jewel-like colouring of the pictures and the strong gleam of her own red hair made the only spots of brightness in the room. She frowned again at the sound of footsteps coming rapidly up the attic stairs.

"Can't they let me alone?" she thought crossly. "One can't put down a painting as one would a bit of needle-work."

The door opened and Yule's face peeped round it, a white wedge in the dusk, but a cheerful mask withal.

"Hallo, old thing! Not finished yet?"

"No. What's the hurry? I can't come down until this is done. You know I don't mind whether my supper's hot or cold."

"Or whether it's called dinner or not," returned Yule good-humouredly. "I can't help feeling amused at the ready way in which Mrs. Daylight calls our meals luncheon and dinner now, but makes no difference whatsoever in the menus thereof!"

"I'm glad you're so easily amused," said Nanetty tartly. "To me it seems merely silly."

"What's the matter, Nanetticoat?" asked Yule in surprise.

Nanetty put down her palette on the table near her with a jerk and dumped her brushes into the turpentine-pot.

"You're the matter, if you must know it."

"I? What have I done now?"

"It's what you haven't done that worries me," Nanetty said.

"Sorry for my sins of omission, old girl, but I can't imagine what you're driving at."

"Honest Injun?" asked Nanetty curtly.

"Honest Injun," Yule answered.

The outlines of cheek and chin had sharpened painfully, Nanetty thought, but the clear grey eyes held only a genuine perplexity beside the sadness that tugged at her heart-strings.

"Very well, then," she said, clearing her throat. "I'd better tell you a little story which I read some time ago and which has stuck in my memory rather persistently."

"Fire away," said Yule, seating himself on the edge of the table and dabbing the brushes up and down in the turpentine-pot.

"It was about a marriage *à la mode* in the old French days."

"Oh!" said Yule, checking his hand.

Without looking at him she saw him stiffen. Nevertheless she continued: "This marriage had been arranged between a Marquis and a girl who was many years younger than he. She saw him only once before the ceremony. She was half dead with fright and nervousness when they were left alone together on their wedding-day. The Marquis, who was a man of the world and who had fallen madly in love with his young bride, exerted himself to amuse her and to set her at ease. That night he escorted her to her bedroom door, where he left her, having kissed her hand and wished her good repose and happy dreams. The next day he continued these tactics, keeping her amused all day and parting from her respectfully at night. During the three weeks' honeymoon that followed he surrounded her with every delicate attention that the heart of man could devise, never trespassing farther than a kiss of her hand at the nightly leave-taking. At the end of the three

weeks one night when the Marquis had retired as usual he was roused by a knocking at his door.

"It was his bride, who ran to him and flung her arms around him. She was frightened almost to death by a burglar, she declared. She had heard a noise in her room and was terrified to return to it!" Nanetty paused. After a moment Yule's voice came across the dusk rather forbiddingly.

"A charming tale and quite in the French manner, but I confess that the point has escaped me."

"Has it?" asked Nanetty dryly. She was silent for an instant, then she said in the same significant tone: "Yule, don't you think it's about time for that burglar to visit Caroline Place?"

The silence that followed lasted only for seconds, yet it seemed hours to Nanetty before he hurled a violent:

"Good God, how indecent women are!" across the stillness at her. She caught her breath at the sudden gulf that yawned between them. He seemed to be at an immense distance from her, too far away now for any contact. Nevertheless she continued her effort:

"Thanks. . . . If you mean me I am going to be more indecent still. . . . Yule, you're a fool!" she broke out. "Why don't you make your marriage a real marriage, instead of the gruesome mockery it is? I don't profess to know from personal experience, but married women have told me what a real tangible thing the marriage-bond is, how it gives a man a peculiarly definite hold over a woman, a claim which she can never deny ——"

"It would scarcely appear so from even a cursory study of the Divorce Lists," interrupted Yule coldly.

Nanetty plunged on, hot-cheeked, but undaunted.

"Well, it's a definite hold, a definite claim. In your case I believe it would work. You see you've never made Jessamy feel bound to you in any way. At present her attitude is rather that of a person on a first visit to a

foreign country. Everything is new to her, big things and trifles alike. Even the language has a spice of novelty. Wait until that wears off, until she meets some of her old circle again and her early life begins to reassert its former pull. You may lose her altogether unless you have some definite, tangible, real claim on her, unless you make her feel that she belongs absolutely to you and that her duty is towards you and you only." She felt rather than saw Yule's eyes on her as he answered with a difficult restraint.

"If I understand you aright you are advocating the tactics of the caveman. . . . When I gave Jessamy the shelter of my house and name I had no intention of stunning her into physical submission, nor have I now. You and I apparently differ in our opinions as to what constitutes a real marriage. My idea is a union of body and soul in which love gives freely and willingly. Yours, obviously, is a physical union only, where lust ravishes at will. That wasn't the sort of marriage I promised Jessamy. She offered . . . but I'm not a cave-man, after all." He stopped and looked searchingly at Nanetty, who stood facing him with her hands on the back of a chair. "The gloves are off now with a vengeance," he said, with a queer little smile.

"Thank God, we've always been able to be frank with each other," she cried. "If — if I didn't care for you so much I'd let you cut your throat in your own way, but as it is I can't stand by and see ——" she lifted her hands in a sudden hopeless gesture.

"Do you think I don't realize that, old thing?" said Yule, with a disconcerting return to friendliness and normality, which made Nanetty feel even more impotent than she had done before. "Perhaps I'm not cutting my throat, after all ——"

"I'm really very angry with you both," cried a gay voice behind them. "Yule, didn't I send you up specially to bring Nanetty down? I don't believe you ever told

her about the sweetbreads. I've given your share to Daylight to keep hot for you, Nanetty, but it won't be a bit nice now. What on earth are you conspiring about up here? You can conspire as much as you like downstairs and I'll go away if you wish."

In the dusk they could only see each other's faces as white blurs. No incriminating expressions were visible.

Jessamy's little scolding gave Nanetty time to get a grip on herself again, and Yule had recaptured his normal poise some minutes before her unexpected entrance.

"Nanetty was seizing the golden opportunity of giving me a thorough wigging," Yule declared as lightly as he could. "You'll stand up for me, won't you, Jessamy?"

"Of course I will," she cried, coming up to him and slipping her hand through his arm. "What was it all about?"

It seemed to Nanetty as if the two shadowy figures linked themselves together in the dusk as if to mock her puny attempts at interference, so prettily wifely was Jessamy's attitude of instant partnership, so husband-like Yule's quick appeal for her support.

She drew her breath sharply as she turned away.

"It would be a pity to let those sweetbreads burn," she said, with a curl of her lip at the inevitable intrusion of meals and routine upon even the most pressing moments of life. "I'd better go down, I suppose."

"Oh, they won't be burnt, I assure you," said Jessamy lightly, turning to follow her, her hand still within Yule's arm. "That's the advantage of having at least two practical people in the house."

"Meaning?" queried Yule, with mock anxiety.

"Myself and Daylight, of course."

"What cheek!" said Yule, stepping back to hold open the door for her. Jessamy gave him a quick little questioning glance as she passed through.

"There's something uncanny in talking like this to each other through the gloom. We might be shadows

or ghosts," she said, with an odd note in her voice.

Yule did not guess that for the first time she wondered whether his avoidance of her touch were accidental or deliberate. He had become so skilful in his withdrawals and evasions that it never occurred to him that she could possibly have noticed anything.

He forgot Nanetty's diatribe, even his own ever-increasing burden for a moment in a rapt contemplation of the poise of Jessamy's head as she went lightly down the stairs in front of him, and in wondering if he could ever capture its distracting line for his fantastic illustrations to Ruskin's "Birthday Wish."

He had taken the bedroom behind Jessamy's for his own use and used the little room in which he had slept on the first night as his study. The view of the river drew him as with a spell. The changing water-way held magic in its moonlit dusks, its morning mists and its daylight clarity. Here, in the narrow room with its sunny primrose-washed walls, he found refuge, battle-ground and workshop, all in one. It was, for him, a veritable clearing-ground of the emotions, such as he thought he should never have needed again: such shortness of vision demonstrating clearly that to-day can never peer successfully over the rim of to-morrow.

He opened the door now and went in, letting the two women go downstairs without him.

IX

"Dear Mrs. Amber,

"We shall be so pleased if you and Mr. Amber will both come to the little party we are giving for the Waldron children on Friday next, the 11th instant, from 4—7. If Miss Cotes cares to come as well we shall be very glad to see her also.

"With kind regards and hoping you will all come,

"Sincerely yours,

"Camilla Chalfont-Smythe."

Jessamy read the letter aloud at the breakfast-table and when she had finished looked round to collect opinions.

"I must say the fair Camilla does us handsomely," said Yule. "I shall certainly go. What about you, Nanetty?"

"I am only thrown in as an after-thought," returned Nanetty, "but I believe I'd rather like to go, all the same. Some of those kiddies have a refreshing amount of original sin in them."

Yule turned to Jessamy. His eyes had sought her first, but she had not been looking at him and Nanetty had, hence his question to the latter.

"You'll come, too, won't you?" he said now.

Some imp of perversity entered Jessamy. . . . She was not going to be taken for granted like that. . . . . She shook her head and a spark of defiance shone in her great dark eyes.

"Not I. The thought of three hours in the company of the Chalfont-Smythes and a crowd of noisy children doesn't appeal to me in the least."

Nanetty's grey glance flicked over her. Yule said nothing for a moment. Then he returned quietly: "So that's that. If you don't want to go of course you needn't. By the way, have we got any decent cards in the house? I'll want some for my conjuring tricks."

"I bought two packs the other day," said Jessamy. "They're in the drawer in that bookcase."

"I'll only need one. I must mark some of the cards for my tricks. It won't spoil them in the least. Only myself or an expert could tell what my little pricks mean."

"We must be careful not to play bridge with those cards," said Nanetty smiling.

Yule smiled back. If he felt any disappointment at Jessamy's decision he did not show it. When breakfast was over he rose, took the pack of cards out of the

drawer slipped it into his pocket and went upstairs.

Jessamy took up the newspaper and opened it. Nanetty sat in silence for a moment, then she, too, got up and pushed back her chair.

"Have you finished, Jessamy?" she asked.

"Quite, thanks."

"Then I may as well clear away."

"I wish you wouldn't," said Jessamy from behind her paper.

"Why not? It's no trouble to me, and one gets it done while Mrs. Daylight and Emma are making the beds. You needn't bother."

"I'm not going to."

"You don't much, do you," asked Nanetty in her brusque way.

"No. Why should I?"

Nanetty, stacking the plates and cups on a tray, ignored that particular question, which, however, she promptly countered with another: "Why won't you go to that party?"

"Why should I?" asked Jessamy again.

"Because it would please Yule."

Jessamy lowered her paper and faced Nanetty, bright-eyed and defiant.

"To please Yule! . . . That's the be-all and end-all of your existence, of course!" she flung at her.

Nanetty did not pick up the childishly thrown gauntlet. "Yule is my only living relation in the world," she answered coldly. "He and I have always meant a good deal to each other. I confess that it does give me pleasure to please him, although I am not nearly so much indebted to him as you are."

"I am quite ready to pay my debts," flashed Jessamy. "I do pay them. I ——" she stopped.

"How?"

Jessamy fell silent. It was rather difficult to explain to this coldly angry woman exactly how she did pay her

debt to Yule. At last she spoke: "At any rate, I have brought harmony to his life."

"Harmony? . . . Good God!" A swift vision of that year of quiet homely happiness (in spite of the detestable little house in Radnor Crescent) flashed across Nanetty's mind. "If you mean the house, he'd have come to live in Caroline Place in any case."

Jessamy glanced round the room with its bowl of daffodils on the table, its mellow curtains and chair-covers, the glow of the pictures on the grey-green walls: then out at the newly-paved garden.

"Well, you can't deny that I've improved the place. You can put that on my credit side."

"I don't want to deny it. You have excellent taste. I grant you that. But you're starving Yule in other ways. What are you doing to him that has worn him to a shadow? He was lean enough before, but he's thin now almost to transparency. Can't you see that? Are you blind?"

"Has Yule complained?"

"Yule . . . ? He wouldn't complain if he were dying!"

Jessamy looked as she felt, disturbed and uncomfortable. What business had Nanetty to harangue her like that? Why should the relations between herself and Yule concern her? Surely that was a purely personal matter between the two of themselves and no business of any outsider's, no matter how close a relation she might be.

She told Nanetty so, in no measured language. When she had finished Nanetty looked at her in silence for a moment, scorn and contempt in the rain-grey eyes that were so like Yule's in all but expression. Then she said in a tone that matched her look.

"You're a very foolish, ignorant girl, and the worst of it is that you're quite old enough and quite clever enough to know better."

With that thrust she left the room, head held high and banners flying: yet in her heart lurked the miserable feeling that she had done more harm than good to the cause she had so rashly championed.

Jessamy looked after her, half defiant, half perturbed. Nanetty's onslaught had been that of the bee, who leaves her sting behind to rankle in the wound she has made.

The sting in this case was the bitter truth that once again forced itself upon Jessamy's consciousness: the knowledge that in her rash folly she had rushed both Yule and herself into a trap from which there was no escape.

X

"You won't change your mind, then?" Some touch of pleading underneath the ordinary tone tugged suddenly at Jessamy's heart-strings.

"No, Yule." To soften the uncompromising negative she smiled up at him from the corner of the couch where she lay curled up with a book in her hand. "I'd like to please you, of course——" Such concession had Nanetty's diatribe extracted! —"but it wouldn't please you to see me bored to tears for three hours, now would it?"

"I'd hate it. It would take all the pleasure out of my own afternoon. Still——" he stood by the table beside the couch and moved the bowl of violets that stood on it. "I don't believe you'd be so bored, after all."

"Oh, but I should. I know it. It's an odious day, cold and drizzling. I've got a log fire and an interesting book and am looking forward to a really happy afternoon."

"Well, that's something," Yule declared, pocketing his disappointment. "So am I. Little Molly is a fat bundle of dimples and the boy Johnny is a topping little chap. . . . Yes, Nanetty, I'm coming," he said in

answer to a summons from the hall. "Good-bye, Jessamy dear."

"Good-bye," smiled Jessamy, holding up a softly-rounded cheek towards him.

Yule shook his head with a whimsical smile. "Crumbs are no earthly use to me," he said.

He was gone, leaving Jessamy a-gasp at his cool refusal of the proffered privilege.

"Oh, well——" she said, looking after him rather resentfully. "If he doesn't care, I needn't. . . . Crumbs, indeed! . . ."

She turned rather indignantly to her book, opened it and read a page or two: but to-day the printed word had no spell wherewith to bind her. She put the book down and gazed at the flames, saffron and crocus-blue, that flickered and darted about the resinous pine-logs in the grate with a lapping sound.

In spite of herself her thoughts played like them and darted about the two who had just left the house: Yule and Nanetty.

How staunch they were to each other, how loyal! In spite of the strangeness of their mutual relations she had grown to know them very well during the past two months. Sifting her impressions, she found that the chief of them was a sense of trust. Yes, although she was loath to admit it even to herself, in spite of the little jars and differences that occasionally occurred she found herself trusting in these two, believing (again in spite of herself) in their absolute integrity. There were no crooked twists or turns, as far as she could see, about either Yule or Nanetty. They ran absolutely straight. They were frank and fearless. One could not help trusting them, believing in them. That was something to have gained after her previous bitter experience: something to hold on to: something for which she really *was* in their debt. Nanetty was brusque occasionally to mannerlessness, but always sincere. Yes, she felt sure

of that. Yule was of different fibre, but equally candid and honest.

A thousand little delicacies, little thoughtfulnesses flashed to her mind, crystallized in a single half-remembered phrase: "He compassed her about with sweet observances." Yes, that was just what Yule did to her. He was always considering her, thinking of her, compassing her about with sweet observances. And she . . . Why hadn't he kissed her cheek when she offered it? Why had he said that crumbs were no use? Wasn't even a crumb better than nothing? Wasn't it, perhaps, a foretaste ——?

The door flew open to admit Mrs. Daylight bearing a tea-tray.

"I done you some toast, mum," she said cheerfully. "And 'otted h'up these little scones as well."

When she had arranged everything as Jessamy liked it she paused and said tentatively: "It's h'Emma's day h'out, mum."

"Yes, Daylight. What of that?"

"H'only this, mum, that the fishmonger h'ain't sent that fish for dinner yet and I think I'd better run round and find out why, h'else we shan't 'ave nothing but that scrap of cold beef."

"All right. Run round if you like."

"You won't mind bein' in the 'ouse by yourself, mum? For a few minutes?"

"Not in the least."

"And you'll h'open the door if h'any one comes. Not that there will, h'only the fishmonger might send the fish when I'm gone. It would be just the cross way things 'appen."

"That will be quite all right."

Jessamy, warm and comfortable by the fire, enjoying her tea and scones, felt no apprehensions at the thought of having the house to herself for half an hour or so. Presently she heard the click of the back-door and the

patter of Mrs. Daylight's feet up the short flight of the area-steps.

There was something rather pleasant, she thought, in having the house absolutely to herself. She felt a certain sense of security in the knowledge that no one would intrude on her or disturb her peace. She idled most pleasantly for a while, dipping into her book as she drank her tea.

When she had finished she put her cup on the tray.

"Daylight can take this away when she comes in," she thought. Then suddenly the impulse took her to remove the tray herself. She got up lazily from the couch. "I hate seeing the débris of food about." Thus she excused to herself the impulse that prompted her.

She picked up the tray and, taking it out of the room, was about to set it down on the table in the hall when it occurred to her that she might as well take it down to the kitchen when she was about it.

A pleasant glow from the range fire greeted her eyes as she entered. The red tiles were scrupulously clean, the table white and well scrubbed. From the walls the dish-covers and copper preserving pan winked a welcome: china gleamed on the dresser.

She laid the tray down on the table. As she did so she heard the purring of a taxi-cab in the street outside: then the rasp and jerk of its stoppage. The door of the cuckoo-clock (Mrs. Daylight's most cherished possession) flew open, and the cuckoo, bowing, intimated in his hollow voice that it was five o'clock.

"Some more guests for le P'tit's party," she thought, smiling. Then she gave a violent start as the hall-door bell pealed loudly just above her head.

"Some one for us," she thought, as she watched the bell quivering. "It can scarcely be the fishmonger. They must be making a mistake."

She ran up the kitchen-stairs and into the hall. Her heart thudded a little as she opened the door and saw a

tall man in an overcoat standing on the step, with a square packet under his arm.

"Does Miss Cotes —— My God, Jess! . . . *You?*"

"Lucas!"

Suddenly the world vanished in a black mist as Jessamy clutched wildly, vainly at the door-handle for support. For the first time in her healthy young life she fainted.

XI

When Jessamy recovered from her faint it was to the rapt consciousness that the past interlude had been but a bad dream from which she had just awakened.

She was on the deep couch in the drawing-room at Tudor Lodge with Lucas Grote's arms round her, his dear hard cheek pressed closely against hers, his deep voice, softened as it always was for her, murmuring incoherent love-words in her ear. All was as it had been a hundred times before.

She was the happiest girl in the world instead of the unhappiest. The hideous revelation of Claire's treachery, the mad flight into the night, Yule, Nanetty, her impossible marriage, all were but the figments of her dreaming brain. These things had never really happened. They were all part of the nightmare. But what a horribly vivid nightmare it had been, so plausible, so apparently real!

The relief of awakening from it had all the wonderful intensity of such happenings. She gave a little shiver and then a sigh of pure delight as she put up her hand to Lucas's other cheek and drew his face still closer to hers.

"I *knew* that it was only a dream," she murmured, with the triumphant wisdom of the newly-awakened.

Grote caught the groping fingers and kissed them fiercely.

"A nightmare, rather. Why did you do it, Jess? Why? Don't you know I've been through hell?"

"Hell?"

The word was as a rough touch upon her bubble-bright delusion, shattering it instantly. She struggled to free herself, and holding her body away from him pushed her disordered hair from her eyes, and looked wildly round the room.

It had not been a dream, after all. The firelight flickered over the grey walls of Caroline Place. Yule, Nanetty, and her marriage were real irrevocable facts. She had neither dreamed nor imagined anything. It was all too dreadfully true. She trembled suddenly at the realization. She wanted to hide her face in her hands and cry like a child, but pride held her. She could not think coherently. Lucas was too near her, confusing her mind. She tried to rise, but found that he was still holding her closely.

"No, Lucas. You mustn't. You mustn't," she cried weakly, trying to push him away.

"Why not? You're mine. I'm never going to let you go again."

"No, no," she cried. "You forget. I'm married."

"I haven't forgotten it for one instant. How do you think I could, after all we've been to each other? It's been hell, I tell you."

"Let me go, Lucas. You must let me go."

Grote, still in the grip of the passion which the unexpected sight of her and contact with her soft helplessness had fired anew, tried to re-capture his self-control. Instinct told him that the whole course of their future relations would be affected by what passed between them now. It behooved him to act with the utmost wisdom. But how was it possible to be wise when the mere touch of her set his pulses racing? The loss of Jessamy had driven him nearly distracted and he felt that to regain her he would willingly barter the round world itself, with his own soul thrown in as make-weight.

In the turmoil of his emotions one fact stood clear. He

must make Jessamy feel that he was to be trusted. That was the first point of contact which their new relations must establish. To attain this object he must not touch her again.

His arms fell from about her and, rising abruptly, he went and stood by the mantelpiece, leaning against it and looking down at her from beneath the shadow of his hand.

To his desirous eyes she looked distractingly pretty.

"Why did you do it?" he asked very low. "You haven't told me that yet."

"Why did *you* ——?" Jessamy broke out incoherently. "Oh, you know, you must know what I overheard that night, what nearly drove me mad and sent me running out into the street, ready to do anything, to go anywhere away from you and Claire."

"You little fool! You double-distilled little fool!" cried Grote, with a strange blend of tenderness and exasperation. "What did you hear that sent you off your head like that?"

"You know well enough."

"I don't. Nothing that would account for such mad folly."

"Was it mad folly, Lucas?" Suddenly Jessamy began to tremble violently. "Had I no right to be angry, to feel injured at hearing that you and Claire had been lovers, at finding that you had both planned to trick and deceive me, and meant to go on deceiving me? Was it only folly to run away when I found that the two people I trusted and loved most in the world had made a mock of me and lied to me?"

"Yes," he repeated doggedly. "Absolutely, crass folly."

Jessamy wrung her hands together helplessly. "If you had only told me ——"

"What was there to tell? Before God, Jess, I had almost forgotten that old boy and girl affair with Claire,

so little did it mean to me in comparison with you." The ring of truth was in his words: for what is so dead as a dead passion? When one looks at its grey ashes it is impossible to believe in the leaping flame that once made of it a vivid, vital thing.

"If I had only known ——"

"What difference would it have made?"

"All the difference in the world."

"Now you're talking nonsense," Grote interrupted roughly.

The sight of Jessamy, at once so near and so remote, lovelier to his eyes than ever despite her quenched brightness, wrought upon him almost to distraction. "Why should I have bothered you with that old dead and gone affair? A man's past belongs to himself alone. It doesn't concern a girl what he has done before he meets her. All that matters to her is what happens after they have met. Do you see?"

Jessamy shook her head. She felt oddly as if it were not really she who sat there upon the couch taking part in this incredible conversation.

"You *must* see," said Grote. "It's time your eyes were opened to the realities of the world you live in. You're up against hard facts, not the glamour of romance. You and I are man and woman now, my girl."

To Jessamy he seemed to be tearing veils literally from her eyes: and yet she loved him more than ever in his masculine hardness and ruthlessness.

"When Claire suggested to me that our — affair — shouldn't be spoiled by any knowledge of what had happened in the past, I agreed. I thought that she, being a woman, must know best. We were both mistaken, it seems. . . . It also seems," he went on after a pause, "that we've all paid pretty heavily for that mistake."

"Yes," said Jessamy in a very low tone, after what seemed an interminable interval.

"This man you've married ——" shot out Grote.

"What is he to you? Do you care for him at all, or was he just an instrument to your hand, ready to be used?"

This crudely apt description of Yule and his chivalry flicked Jessamy like a whip-lash. Though nothing had been farther from Grote's intention the words sounded like an indictment of her own conduct. That was just what she had made of Yule: an instrument wherewith to punish Lucas Grote for his deception. And who had been punished the most? She herself, she imagined, for by it she had thrust herself into a trap from which there was no escape. It never occurred to her to pity the principal victim of her own headlong folly, yet a gust of loyalty towards Yule swayed her suddenly.

"I — I am quite happy," she said, though the deadness of her voice belied the statement.

"Thanks," returned Grote dryly. "You've answered me."

"But you haven't answered me," Jessamy broke out. "You haven't told me what there really was between Claire and you."

"My God, what does it matter now? All that matters is that I love you with my whole heart and soul and you're tied to another man for whom you don't care a rap!"

"Hush, Lucas, you mustn't say that. I — I do care for Yule. He — he has been goodness itself — most chivalrous ——" her voice faltered queerly and died on the last old-fashioned word.

"Chivalrous!" echoed Grote in a tone as strange as her own.

What a word for her to use — unless it meant — Here a dazzling flood of light slit the curtain of darkness which had obscured Grote's mental vision. He had always known, and been tenderly amused by Jessamy's romantic conception of life. Could it be possible that she had met and married such another romantic, and that this marriage, bewildering in its suddenness, was a

marriage in name only? Here was a possibility to cling to — a straw for a lover drowning in the sea of love.

Grote straightened his shoulders and his lips twitched to a smile. If his surmise were true all might yet be well between them. With Claire's help —— Suddenly he saw that he could not possibly do without Claire. He saw also that he must at once begin to pave the way for a reconciliation between the two women.

"Claire's been awfully unhappy about you," he began without preamble.

"Has she?" Jessamy leaned back against the couch and closed her eyes, listening to the departing footsteps of her newly-found peace. Her lips were dry, her hands burning. The news of Claire's unhappiness had no power to move her. How could it when she was so unhappy herself? . . . And Lucas still loved her. . . . The words clanged like bells in her ears, confusing her.

"She's devoted to you, you know, Jessamy. She felt your flight terribly."

"Did she?"

"She would give anything to get in touch with you again."

"Would she?"

"Can't you be reasonable, Jess?" His tone softened perceptibly on the little name that he alone used. "You hurt her horribly by running away as you did, and then by sending her that odious letter."

"She hurt me ——" Jessamy's voice choked.

"How? By having once — long ago, remember, Jess — cared for me? Was that such a crime?"

Jessamy, blind to the fatuousness of such a question, was only aware of a lantern held up anew to her folly, displaying it in all its naked crudity.

Yes: that *had* been Claire's crime.

Jessamy saw, now that it was too late, that she had been spurred to her mad action mainly by jealousy, by a pricking hatred of the thought that any woman (but

especially Claire) had ever meant to her lover what she had come to mean, what she only should have meant, for ever and ever!

A hot flush of shame suffused her. Why had she been so silly? Why had she forfeited all she had held dear to gratify this insane desire of punishment? What an utter, utter fool she had been! What had she done? How many lives had she spoiled by her folly? And whom had she really punished?

Herself, most of all. Perhaps Yule, too, the innocent, the chivalrous.

A sudden vision of him as he left her that afternoon — was it only about an hour ago? — flashed across her mind, but she banished it quickly. Lucas Grote at present filled her whole horizon. She wondered suddenly how much Claire had loved him, and swift on the heels of that wonder came an unexpected touch of comprehending pity. Had it been hard for Claire to see him so devoted to her? She had never shown any sign of it. She had been all sympathy with what she had called their idyll. But had she suffered, all the same? It was a thought which would not have occurred to Jessamy a month ago.

She sighed, a deep breath that seemed to come from her very heart.

"Poor Claire!" she murmured.

Grote seized upon the welcome sign of softening.

"Yes, poor Claire, indeed! She has been miserable. I know she longs to see you again, but she told your — Mr. Amber that she would not make the first move. Won't you, Jess?"

"I — don't know." How numb, how unresponsive she felt!

"Look here, Jess." Suddenly, disarmingly his note changed from passion to friendliness. "You've tangled up all our lives by your impulsiveness, but need that necessarily mean the end of everything? Why can't we

make the best of a bad business and be friends again? There's nothing against it that I can see. Now, is there? Can't we let bygones be bygones? Go to Tudor Lodge to see Claire. Will you?"

"I'll —— think about it."

"Think about it as much as you like so long as you go." Skilfully he touched another string, speaking with an effect of frankness that reached the girl even through her numbness. "Look here, Jess. I spoke in heat just now. You'll forgive me if I felt sore and showed it. But we're reasonable people, you and I. We're going to patch up something out of the shreds of what has been, not chuck them away altogether, like fools."

"Can we?" She looked up with a flicker of light in her eyes.

"Of course we can." A warming confidence rang in his voice, strengthening as he saw its instant effect on Jessamy. "This man you've married — Amber. He's quite a decent chap, Claire says, in his own way."

"Oh, yes, he's good — good, Lucas."

"And I'm bad — bad? Is that what you meant to say?" Grote smiled down at the crouching figure on the couch, unable to keep away from the personal touch.

"No, no, of course not." Jessamy's fingers twisted.

"Well, he doesn't want to cut you off from your old life, does he?"

"No," admitted Jessamy reluctantly, thinking of Yule's pleading and her own response, or rather lack of response to it.

"So Claire led me to believe. I — I'd like to meet him ——" the lie almost stuck in his throat.

"Why not?" asked Jessamy, seized with a sudden inspiration. "He's out at present at a children's party ——"

"A children's party?"

"Yes. Doing conjuring tricks to amuse them. He'll be in quite soon. Do stay to dinner and meet him."

The words seemed to utter themselves involuntarily, and for an instant Jessamy felt a wild longing to recall them.

Grote's acceptance, reassuring in its very banality, came too swiftly for any unsaying.

"Thanks very much. If it won't put you out ——"

"Not at all. I'll tell the maid to lay another place, if you'll excuse me for a minute."

"Certainly." His manner was absolutely ordinary. She could not hear the loud chant of triumph that was rising in his heart.

Jessamy rose and slipped out of the room, glad to be away from his disturbing presence for a moment. When she had told Mrs. Daylight of the unexpected visitor and received her assurance that there would be plenty for dinner, she paused for a moment in the hall to quell the strange breathlessness that was almost choking her, and to face this very difficult situation which she had so unexpectedly created for herself. Thoughts flocked incoherently to her brain. Yule would not mind. . . . She did not believe that he had a spark of jealousy in his composition. . . . Suddenly she rather wished that he had. . . . He would be more pleased than anything else that she had effected this sudden reconciliation. . . . Yule was a fool. . . . But she had been a fool too. . . . Well, she was not going to be a fool any longer. She was going to pick up and mend the shards of her past, and remake a beautiful friendship with Lucas, with which her mad marriage need not interfere.

She saw no flaws in her new scheme. Temptingly the marsh light flickered and danced in front of her, luring her on.

XII

Suddenly she remembered that Lucas, on the doorstep, had asked for Miss Cotes. What had he meant? What had he wanted of Nanetty?

Spurred by curiosity Jessamy went quickly back into the drawing-room.

She had left it in an alarmingly intimate dusk, with the leaping firelight for sudden illumination. She came back to find that it was transformed to a safer brilliance of golden-shaded light and drawn curtains.

Lucas had taken a chair at the opposite side of the fire facing the couch. He did not dare to risk half-lights or contacts any more than did Yule Amber, and for an inversion of the same reason.

He rose at her entrance and stood silent for a scarcely perceptible appraisal of her changed attitude. This was the old Jess, with a new Jess added: a Jess whose faintly-tinted cheeks he had once loved to compare to wild rose petals, whose eyes he had called pools of mystery until a star shone suddenly in their depths, but whose new poise, a little hard, perhaps, he had never seen before.

"I hope you'll forgive my cheek in turning on the light and drawing your curtains," he said quickly, to cover his pause. "The room seemed so dark when you had gone ——"

"That's quite a pretty compliment," said the new Jess, sinking down again in her favourite corner of the couch. "But if you and I are to be friends, Lucas, we mustn't have any of that sort of nonsense. Let us start clear."

"Just as you like," he answered rather heavily. "I'm ready to follow your lead, Jess . . . for just as long as it suits my book," he added to himself.

"Yule and Nanetty will be back quite soon, I imagine," Jessamy continued, profoundly distrustful of any silence in which so much could be said and so little might. "And, by the way, I am consumed with curiosity as to what you wanted with Nanetty?"

"Nanetty? Who's Nanetty? I didn't ——"

"But you did. You asked for Miss Cotes. She's Nanetty, my husband's cousin, who lives with us."

"My God!" gasped Grote. "What a coincidence! Miss Cotes Amber's cousin? Jove, that's queer!"

"Why should it be queer? . . . But I didn't know that you knew each other."

"We don't. I came to see her with a message from my uncle."

"What uncle?"

"Old Julius Brand, who runs the Leyden Gallery in Kensington. Surely I've spoken of him to you."

"I don't remember," said Jessamy, wrinkling her forehead. "Oh, yes, I do. I have some recollection of your telling me once about an old uncle with whom you had quarrelled. You didn't mention his name, so I thought it must be Grote like yours. Is that the one?"

"Yes. He's the only uncle I have. But we've made up our quarrel since then. He's a peppery old chap, but we're never at loggerheads for very long."

Jessamy's brain began to work, detaching itself with difficulty from her own concerns.

"Then your uncle and Nanetty's old Brand are one and the same person?"

"Presumably."

"She copies pictures for him."

"Yes. She fakes old Dutch and Italian paintings so cleverly that you can scarcely tell them from the originals, my uncle says."

Jessamy started. "No, Lucas. Not fakes!"

Grote looked at her curiously. "Rather. I thought you knew or I wouldn't have given the show away. However, it's all in the family, so it doesn't matter. My uncle does a roaring trade — in a quiet way, of course — with his faked pictures. He has a large clientele among the simple New-Rich of many countries, who demand original old masters for their growing picture-galleries. It's his business to meet that demand, and your Miss Cotes is one of his sources of supply. Did she never tell you?"

"She told me that she copied pictures for this — for this Mr. Brand, but she is under the impression that they are sold as copies."

"Is she?" said Grote dubiously. "I doubt it. Of course by the time they are subjected to my uncle's special process they really do look old. Perhaps she hasn't seen them in that state."

"I'm sure she hasn't." Jessamy could not but believe that Nanetty was innocent of the charge of consciously faking her pictures. She could not reconcile such an idea with what she knew of her character, its strength, its honesty.

"By the way, a specimen of her work hangs in the library at Tudor Lodge," Grote went on.

"Lucas, no! Not Dad's old Dutch picture — the one of the red houses?" Back to Jessamy's mind flashed the memory of her altercation with Nanetty over that very picture.

Grote nodded, his lips twitching to a smile.

"I couldn't help feeling amused when I saw it there I had admired the thing in my uncle's gallery about a week before he sold it to your father, whom I didn't even know then.

"Mr. Wyatt showed it to me himself with pride the first time I went to Tudor Lodge, but as I wasn't on speaking terms with Uncle Julius then I didn't disclose the relationship. Nor, on the other hand, did I give the show away."

"That proves what I say, then, for Nanetty and I had an argument about the authenticity of that very picture. She said that the original belonged to Lady Havant, and that Dad's picture must be a copy. She liked it so much that she made a copy for herself besides those she made for Mr. Brand. She showed it to me and told me all about it. She wouldn't have been so frank, surely ——"

"You never can tell," Grote thrust in. "Some of these artists have a queer warped pride ——"

"There's nothing queer or warped about Nanetty, except ——"

"Except what?"

"Well, she has a crooked shoulder, poor thing, but ——"

"There you are, warped body, warped mind," said Grote.

The quick interchange of unfinished sentences came straight back out of the past, but with this difference: that whereas Jessamy had formerly been only too ready to agree with Lucas now she wanted just as eagerly to disagree with him.

"You're quite wrong, Lucas," she cried. "That doesn't follow at all. Nanetty has not a warped mind. She's a fine woman. She's been awfully good to me."

"That's right. Hit a man when he's down," said Grote with mock humility. "You're surely not going to force a quarrel on me now, Jessamy, just when I've found you again."

"No," said Jessamy with a quick indrawn breath. Then she continued hastily in rather a quavering voice, for pauses must be avoided at all costs: "It seems so extraordinary that you and I should be sitting here ——" she stopped abruptly, seeing the abyss to which her unconsidered words had led her.

"Talking amicably, or rather on the verge of quarrelling about something that doesn't matter a jot to either of us," Grote broke in a little bitterly.

"We can't talk about the things that do matter," said Jessamy hastily, though in her heart she felt that this business of the faked pictures did matter unexpectedly to her. "Don't you see that, Lucas? Our only chance — our only chance is to be just ordinary. You do see that, don't you?"

"Yes. But I wonder, Jess, if you have the faintest idea of how damnably hard it is to be 'just ordinary' where you are concerned?"

"I — I —— It's hard for me too, Lucas. But if — if this thing is to work ——"

"It shall work," declared Grote hastily, seeing that the girl was groping towards some decision inimical to his ends. "There's no earthly reason why it shouldn't. I'll be content with crumbs. All I want is to live in your world, Jess, not to be shut again into outer darkness. It's not much to ask, God knows, after all I once hoped for."

The humiliated drop in his voice went straight to Jessamy's heart.

"No, it's not much to ask," she answered very low. "All I can give you, with honesty, with decency, I will, Lucas."

"You — dear!" Fire, instantly suppressed, flashed in Grote's eyes.

Yule's parting phrase suddenly rang in Jessamy's ears. "Crumbs are no earthly use to me!"

What a contrast to Lucas's humble assertion! It did not occur to her that the positions of the two men were very different; that the man whom she had married might possibly have the right to expect more than the man from whom she had run away.

As far as he had gone in that unlooked-for encounter Lucas Grote had certainly played his cards well.

XIII

The carved grandfather clock in the hall struck once with the sharp clear note peculiar to its age.

"Half-past seven," said Jessamy unnecessarily. "They ought to be here soon." She was still afraid of an unfilled silence, so harked back to her earlier question. "You're very elusive, Lucas. Do you realize that you haven't yet told me why you came here to see Nanetty?"

"Haven't I? Forgive me. I'm afraid I digressed. It was always easy for me to digress when you were

there, Jess." Again he tried to pull her thoughts to the personal.

"Yes. We were always flying off at tangents, weren't we?" She stifled a sigh. "But I begin to suspect a mystery here." She must keep to the point, she felt.

"There is no mystery. I went to see Uncle Julius this afternoon. I found that he had just picked up an old Dutch or Italian picture of which he was desirous to have two copies made by Miss Cotes as soon as possible. He was going to bring them here himself, but as I was anxious to please him after our recent quarrel I offered to do so — and there you are!"

Jessamy tucked her feet up under her and leaned one elbow on the end of the couch, staring into the fire.

"What a strange chance it was that brought you to this house of all houses!" she murmured.

"It was not chance," Grote answered with disconcerting directness. "It was fate."

"Are you a fatalist, then?"

"In some ways."

"Do you believe that — all this — was pre-ordained from the beginning?"

There was a pleading ring in Jessamy's voice. She wanted the vague comfort of an instant assurance, but Grote did not answer immediately. Beneath the shelter of his hand his hungry eyes were devouring every new-old item of her beauty, the vital springing masses of her hair, the clear pallor of her skin, the depth and mystery of her eyes. What was there about this slim creature of fire and dew that set her apart from all other women? He knew half a dozen much more beautiful girls. Claire, in her heyday, indeed even still, was possibly better-looking. But there was an emanation of charm from Jessamy which no other woman of his acquaintance owned: a delicious elusiveness was hers, that tantalized even while it allured, a fragrance, a spell. . . .

For a moment Grote felt as if it would be better for him

and for her if he walked straight out of that grey and gold room, out of the house and out of Jessamy's life. The next instant he could have laughed aloud at such an idea.

His feet were chained: his will was set upon regaining what had once been his and what no other man should ultimately keep from him. He raised his head and looked full at Jessamy with his old conquering smile.

"Sorry, Jess, for not answering sooner, but I was thinking. Pre-ordained from the beginning? Who can say? Perhaps so. I'm sure I don't know. One thing I feel pretty certain of, though, and that is that the thread of your fate is irrevocably entwined with mine. The pattern of our lives is woven together. Of that I feel convinced."

"You do?" A pulse fluttered in Jessamy's throat. Her voice fluttered in unison. She looked towards the tall dominating figure by the fire with a wistful appeal. "Then let's try to make that part of the pattern as beautiful as possible. Shall we, Lucas?"

"My God!" exclaimed Grote in a choked voice: then recovering himself: "Yes, Jess. I'll do my best, anyhow."

"I, too," answered Jessamy very low.

The click of a closing door, the sound of voices in the hall announced the return of Yule and Nanetty from the party. Jessamy jumped up from her corner, conscious of a mingled sense of excitement and relief.

"There are the others. I must go and tell them," she said rather incoherently.

She was gone, closing the door behind her.

Yule was taking off his overcoat in the hall; Nanetty had already reached the foot of the stairs when Jessamy came quickly out of the drawing-room and faced them, her hand on the door-handle behind her, her cheeks faintly flushed, her eyes very big and bright.

"It really was rather jolly," Yule began. "I wish you had ——"

"Yule, something very strange has happened." Jessamy's voice, a little high, a little strained, broke across the friendly greeting. "Yule, listen! . . . Lucas Grote is here. I have asked him to stay to dinner."

"Lucas Grote!" amazement rang in Yule's tone.

"Lucas Grote. What brought him here?" said Nanetty, turning sharply.

"The queerest chance!" Jessamy's words tumbled over each other in her haste to explain. "He really came to see you, Nanetty. He brought you a picture which his uncle, Julius Brand, wants you to copy. The old man was going to bring it himself, but Lucas volunteered — oh, isn't it queer? Isn't it extraordinary that he should have come here of all places in the world?"

"Lucas Grote old Brand's nephew?" repeated Nanetty slowly, her shrewd eyes searching Jessamy's incoherence for — she scarcely knew what.

Jessamy knew well enough what *she* was looking for in Nanetty and her heart leaped in relief at the failure of her quest. There was no sign of confusion, no self-consciousness even, in Nanetty's keen, inquiring glance. Jessamy could have laughed aloud in her relief as she turned to Yule, whose hand touched her wrist in a quick unwonted caress.

"My dear, I am so sorry. Wasn't it very awkward for you, after ——"

"No, no, Yule. Only just at first. That — that's all over and done with. The past is past and I'm going to forget it. I'm going to see Claire, and Lucas and I are going to be friends — if you don't mind," her lips added as an after-thought, the while her heart declared — "Whether you mind or not."

But Yule wouldn't mind, she felt sure of that. He would be glad to hear of her reconcilation with her former lover. Yule was queer. He had no jealousy in his com-

position. He was full of odd quixotic impulses. Hadn't he proved that by marrying her? He had wanted her to be friends with Claire — and possibly Lucas — all along. He *was* queer . . . he was indeed. . . .

Jessamy's jumbled thoughts were more or less reflected in Amber's mind as he responded quickly.

"Of course I don't mind, Jessamy. I am only too glad that you should be friends with — with any one out of your former life."

Nanetty threw him a quick glance which said, "More fool you!" as she turned to go up the stairs. "I'll be down in a minute, Jessamy. Better ask Mr. Grote if he'd like to wash his hands."

Jessamy still barred the drawing-room door, facing Yule.

"You're sure you don't mind?" she went on breathlessly. "You don't think it odd of me to have asked him to stay on? He said he wanted to meet you, so I ——"

"I should have thought it much more odd if you hadn't. We can afford to be sorry for poor Grote, you and I." On a sudden inexplicable impulse Amber caught Jessamy to him and pressed a swift, hard kiss on her half-open lips.

When he released her with an equally startling suddenness he was trembling as much as she was. The impulse had taken them both completely by surprise. White face stared at white face.

"Yule — Yule, you shouldn't. You ——"

"Why not? . . . You're my wife." He was breathless, as if he had been running. "Well, perhaps I shouldn't, after all. . . . Introduce me to our guest."

He opened the door and stepped aside to let her enter. She looked towards the fireplace. Grote had braced himself for the inevitable encounter. He stood in the

centre of the hearthrug, head erect, shoulders stiffly straightened.

Jessamy glanced back. "Yule, this is Lucas Grote. Lucas, my husband, Yule Amber."

She had not meant to be cruel in her faltering introduction, yet Grote felt as if she had stabbed him to the heart with that one keen word, husband.

He had himself well in hand as he went forward to meet the man who had supplanted him, the man who had stolen his woman from him. His sharpened scrutiny flickered to contempt as he saw Amber's slight physique and thin, plain face.

"What could she have seen in such a weed? A tool? . . . A whip for my scourging? . . . Chivalry? What did she mean by that? . . . By God, yes! She does look virginal still, unawakened. . . . By God! . . . ."

"I am glad to meet you, Mr. Grote. It is friendly of you to take pot-luck with us like this. You are the first of Jessamy's old friends to be welcomed to her new home," Amber was saying as he held out his hand.

In some strange way Yule really did welcome this man beneath his roof, so long as his presence neither hurt nor disturbed Jessamy. He was glad that she should be no longer cut adrift from her former life. He saw no menace for himself in such conjunction, nor for her. His outlook on the matter was curiously simple. "On earth peace, goodwill towards men" might justly have summed it up.

He loved Jessamy: he trusted her. It was only himself whom he did not trust. That impulse of his just now . . .

Grote touched the friendly hand, then dropped it as if it had stung him.

His mind echoed Yule's offending phrases—"Mr. Grote . . . glad to meet you . . . pot-luck . . . Jessamy's new home . . ! The bounder! ——" while

his lips forced themselves to the easy banalities of rejoinder.

"Awfully good of you to let me stay on unceremoniously like this. Such an extraordinary piece of luck for me, taking Jessamy unawares. She was so surprised that she agreed to let bygones be bygones almost before she knew where she was. There's no reason whatever why she shouldn't, now, is there?"

"None whatever," Yule agreed warmly.

In his heart he could not help admiring this big man who took his defeat so bravely, who was so pluckily willing to put up with the second best now that the best was no longer for him.

To lose Jessamy . . . a Jessamy who had loved him, too. . . . What greater blow could a man receive? All the generous impulses of Yule's nature welled up in response to such courage, such fortitude.

"Mrs. Wyatt will be delighted when she hears the good news. She has been fretting all these weeks," Grote continued.

"I know," said Yule sympathetically.

"But we needn't go into that now. The past is past. The present — of all the queer coincidences!" Grote broke off suddenly.

All at once he had recovered poise, self-confidence, certainty. He had nothing to fear from this fool. . . . Claire had been right there, the fellow was no knave. . . . All the easier to deal with, consequently.

"You said yourself that it wasn't chance," Jessamy thrust in.

She curled herself up in her favourite corner of the couch once more, and motioned to Yule to sit beside her. His presence gave her a sudden feeling of safety. Grote went back to his former seat, so that he now faced both husband and wife.

Husband and wife!

Had any one told him but a few hours earlier that he

would be under the roof of the man who had stolen Jessamy from him, and not only that, but accepting his hospitality, he would not have believed it. He would have vowed such a state of things impossible.

Yet here it was, an accomplished fact. The eternal triangle strangely twisted. Well, he would twist it farther and less singularly to his own uses. This fool should see. . . .

"I am a bit of a fatalist," he answered, smiling easily at Jessamy. "I don't believe that such events as these are the happenings of blind chance."

"How many of the abstractions of life are referred to as blind! Chance is blind, Justice is blind and most certainly Love is blind," said a clear, rather disagreeable voice from the doorway.

Jessamy looked up to see that Nanetty had entered unperceived.

In her grey silk dress she looked old and colourless, except for the flame of her red hair against the white door behind her. At sight of her frowning scrutiny the faint suspicion of her candour which Grote had instilled into Jessamy began to gnaw uneasily at the girl once more.

Nanetty looked worried, even a little furtive, Jessamy thought, as she hastened to make the necessary introduction.

"Nanetty, I don't think you've met Mr. Grote. Lucas, Miss Cotes, for whom you brought that picture here this afternoon."

Nanetty bowed stiffly. Grote smiled as he returned her salutation.

"Your work is not unknown to me, Miss Cotes, although I haven't had the pleasure of meeting you until now."

"Isn't it?" said Nanetty indifferently. "I came to tell you that dinner is ready, Jessamy. Emma is out, so Mrs. Daylight asked me to let you know."

Jessamy rose, with a little flush of embarrassment at Nanetty's tactlessness.

She need not have been so gauche about their household arrangements before Lucas. . . .

"We really must get a gong," she exclaimed. "We've got into very slack ways, I'm afraid."

"Let me give you one as a belated wedding-present," suggested Grote smoothly. "May I have the pleasure of taking you in to dinner?"

But Jessamy was not going to run the risk of further contact.

"Oh, we go in quite without ceremony here," she said as lightly as she could.

XIV

The dinner-table passed muster, Jessamy thought at her first hasty glance. It would not have done for her to delay in order to see to it herself, so she had begged Mrs. Daylight to do her best, and that capable woman had certainly risen to the occasion.

She had put the best white cloth upon the table. No lace mats upon a polished surface for her. She considered them "meanlike." Henry Nimmo's old silver candlesticks bore the Chinese-yellow shades with black silhouettes which Nanetty's clever fingers had fashioned, and the yellow jonquils had been bought and arranged only that morning. Of course it was not quite what Lucas was accustomed to, but for an impromptu it would do.

Jessamy had no room in her thoughts for the pin-pricks of minor detail. The incredible had come to pass: the impossible was actually happening.

She and Lucas — *Lucas!* — Yule and Nanetty were sitting around the same table, breaking mutual bread, and talking amicably about nothing at all.

Stay, Nanetty was not talking much nor was she in the least amicable. . . . What was it to her whether

Lucas came or went? Surely she did not take a low view of the situation? By her own friendship for Yule she ought to know what friendship between man and woman might mean. She was afraid for Yule, that was what it was, but why couldn't she give her, Jessamy, credit for common decency?

Jessamy, resentful of possible criticism and secure in the self-confidence of her utter inexperience, could not know that the first sight of her shining eyes and quickened face had filled Nanetty with a swift foreboding, not only for Yule's happiness but for the girl's own. Later, when Nanetty saw Grote for herself and marked his strong masculinity, his almost aggressive ease of manner and mastery of the situation, that first grim foreboding thickened like some great black rain-cloud to a distinct presage of evil. The feeling suffocated her. She could not eat. She only played with her food and drank long, unquenching draughts of water.

"We are wandering along the edge of a jungle," she thought. "And that big sleek beast is only awaiting his opportunity to spring upon us and tear our lives to pieces."

Never had she seen Jessamy so gay, so animated. It was a beauty, a gaiety that added to the weight on Nanetty's heart. A faint rose flushed Jessamy's cheeks, her great eyes shone as if there were a star in each. She played the hostess very prettily, Nanetty thought dully. She seemed to accept the whole strange situation as a matter of everyday. That was the best way to take it, of course, but ——

Yule seconded her ably in his quiet way. With him the instinct of hospitality was very strong. A man who broke his bread and ate his salt was as his brother, no matter how unwittingly one might have wronged the other. He had no doubt now but that Grote had forgiven him as freely as he would have forgiven Grote had the other man been the innocent aggressor. Grote (rather

amazingly, he had admitted to himself, at first) had taken his defeat as a man should. His very first sentence had shown that: his quick frank avowal of having surprised Jessamy into forgiveness of the past. It was a generous surrender of the key of the situation into Yule's own hand, and he felt bound to show by his subsequent behaviour how much he appreciated such magnanimity.

When at last they rose from the table Nanetty felt as if she could have screamed aloud. It was not often that her nerves played her such tricks, but they had gone through the process of being strung up to jangling point all day; beginning with Jessamy's refusal to go to the party, and working up through Yule's pathetic delight in the children next door, to this unexpected — and to her hideous — development of an impossible situation.

"We'll have coffee and cigarettes in the drawing-room," smiled Jessamy. "There is no port, Lucas. You see we did not know you were coming."

"I'll fetch the coffee-tray," said Yule. "I never like the thought of Mrs. Daylight carrying it up those stairs."

He disappeared down the backstairs as the others went into the drawing-room, Nanetty with dragging feet and leaden heart.

"I haven't delivered my uncle's picture to you yet, Miss Cotes," said Grote's smooth voice in her ear.

"No," said Nanetty tonelessly.

"Where did I put it?" He looked round the room. "I must have left it in the hall when you ——" he glanced significantly at Jessamy and did not finish his sentence. "I'll get it."

He was back before Jessamy had time to do more than collect the thoughts scattered by the memory of her loss of consciousness and subsequent awakening in his arms.

It was a memory which Grote had deliberately intended to revive, and he was aware of his success at the

first glimpse of her averted face, her trembling lips and her sudden avoidance of his eyes.

A smile flickered for an instant and was gone under his small black moustache as he held out the parcel to Nanetty.

"It's an early Dutch or an Italian primitive — I forget which," he said, beginning to undo the string. "But my uncle says that you copy either equally well."

"He ought to know."

"He does," answered Grote with a significant smile, which was not lost upon Jessamy for all her air of abstraction.

She moved uncomfortably in her corner, then rose and fetched a baize-covered table, placing it in front of where she sat on the couch.

What was it to her, after all, whether Nanetty deliberately faked these pictures or not, she asked herself.

Swift as a flash came the answer. It did matter. It mattered surprisingly. In these long months of contact and companionship she had come to a new conception of life, as it was lived by the two cousins: a new idea of the things that mattered and the things that did not matter. And the things that mattered were kindness (she balked, as the young are ever prone to do, at the great word, love), courage, honesty crystal-clear.

That was Yule's honesty: that, also, Nanetty's. She did not realize how she had held on to the consciousness of that in the turmoil of her emotions, nor how much it had come to mean to her until now when, in the case of Nanetty, Lucas had apparently muddied its clarity. She might, if she chose, tell herself that she was absurd, hypersensitive; but Jessamy knew, in her inmost heart, that she would lose something irrevocably once she knew for certain that Nanetty deliberately faked pictures for a living. The doubt tormented her. She would have spoken out there and then and risked changing the stinging smart of suspicion for the balm or stab of cer-

tainty, but for the entrance of Yule with the coffee-tray. She was not going to risk hurting Yule now, when he had been so charming about Lucas.

Yet, as Yule, with a smile, put down the tray in front of her with its glass coffee-machine and Chinese yellow coffee-cups patterned with twisting black dragons, another sickening doubt buzzed and pricked.

Perhaps Yule knew. . . . Perhaps he had known all along. . . . Could he? . . . Was it possible? . . .

They both, apparently, hated anything mean, anything underhand, any pretence. This was a pretence: worse than a pretence, a cheat.

No, it was not possible. Yule could not know. . . . Yet Jessamy was well aware that her mind would never be really at rest until she had questioned Nanetty and found out the truth one way or the other.

She busied herself preparing the coffee while Yule offered Grote his cigarette-case.

"Many thanks," said Grote, "but I only smoke my own. Perhaps you will try one. They're rather decent. A man I know in the city gets them specially for me from his own place in Virginia."

Yule took the proffered cigarette with a word of thanks.

"Won't you have one, Miss Cotes?"

"No, thanks. Like you, I only smoke my own."

"Any special brand?" queried Grote with a bland air of deliberate friendliness.

"Yes. Woodbines!"

Grote smiled. "There our tastes differ, then."

"I had an idea that they would."

"You, Jessamy? You used to like my Virginians long ago." Grote turned and held out his cigarette-case.

Jessamy's heart gave a wild leap at sight of it, then thudded painfully. It was one which she herself had given him. He could not possibly have known that he

was to meet her today, therefore he must like to use it. It looked used, a constant companion. She shook her head as she removed the flame from under the coffee-pot for the third time and blew it out.

"Not till after I've had my coffee," she managed to say. "You like yours black, I know."

"Yes."

Grote stood by the table waiting while she poured the coffee out.

How maddening, how infernally tantalizing this superficial intimacy was! If only he could blot out the other superfluous occupants of the room! Ah, wait until he got her back at Tudor Lodge! Claire would be on his side, she would play up, he knew.

Yet the very presence of these two, hostile as he knew it must be, was helping him unconsciously. It was accustoming Jessamy to him once more, familiarizing her with him anew, stabilizing his position with her, as it were, in a way which a solitude of two could not as yet accomplish. Patience was his rôle, and a matter-of-fact acceptance of these two — aliens — who had thrust themselves so insolently into the orbit of Jessamy's life.

Nanetty, her coffee finished, bent to take up the still unopened picture.

"I'd better put this away," she said rising. "Please tell Mr. Brand that I'll let him have a copy as soon as possible."

"Good," said Grote, with his significant smile.

"Nanetty, you're not going," exclaimed Yule, suspecting flight. "I thought we might have a game of bridge. You play, of course, Grote?"

With a smile he dropped the "Mr." of his earlier diffidence.

"Yes," answered Grote. "I play."

"Let's have a rubber, then, when we've finished our coffee. You'd like one, wouldn't you, Jessamy?"

"Yes," replied Jessamy, putting down her cup.

"Take away the tray, Yule, and we can play on this table."

It was Lucas who had taught her to play bridge. She knew that he, too, remembered as she caught his quick look before she could turn away her head. What a travesty it all was!

Suddenly she felt a spurt of anger against him for not having refused to play . . . and yet, why should he have done so? Was not this matter-of-course acceptance of the inevitable part of the pattern which they were going to weave together, the quiet-toned, restful pattern of their future friendship?

With a swift change of mood she deliberately sought the eyes which she had hitherto avoided (feeling rather than knowing that they seldom strayed far from her face), and smiled into them. It was a smile of understanding, of confidence which set Grote's pulses beating, and lighted him a little further along the path on which his feet were set.

She turned away hastily from the sudden fire that leaped into his eyes as they met hers.

Amber came back into the room with two packs of cards in his hand, which he laid down side by side on the baize-covered table.

"We mustn't play with these," he said whimsically, indicating the left-hand pack.

"Why not?" asked Grote, taking it up idly and putting it down again.

"Because that's the pack I've been doing my conjuring trick with for the kiddies next door this evening. Most of the cards are marked."

"Then we must manage with one pack," said Jessamy. "Put the marked ones away, Yule."

Yule took up the left-hand pack and put it on the chimney-piece, then slipped the other cards out of their case and began to shuffle them.

"We'll cut for partners," he said.

They cut and Jessamy drew Grote, Yule Nanetty.

"We used to play a good combination, Jessamy," said Grote with a lightness which concealed his mounting sense of triumph. "Let us see if you've forgotten all I taught you."

"I don't forget easily," answered Jessamy with what seemed to Yule a rather piteous effort at echoing her quondam lover's tone.

Suddenly he wished that he had not proposed this game, that he had just let their guest smoke another cigarette or two and then go. He had forgotten, in the apparent ease of this strange situation, what a strain it must all be for Jessamy, how trying the unexpected meeting and its subsequent prolongation must have been for her. He had blundered again, just when he wanted most to help her. He was an incurable blunderer. He felt the soft surprised touch of her lips still. . . . What mad impulse had prompted him to seize her like that, at such a moment? He did not know. Perhaps the unexpected knowledge of the other man's presence . . . some primitive instinct of possession. . . . His thoughts spun.

They cut for deal and began to play.

As the game progressed it became evident that either Jessamy had forgotten what Grote had taught her or else that the other two had an abnormal run of luck.

No matter what hands they held Grote and Jessamy seemed to be unable to win, just as Yule and Nanetty seemed incapable of losing. Though the stakes for which they played were not large, at the end of the first rubber Grote and Jessamy had lost nearly a pound.

Grote did not seem perturbed. On the contrary a certain elation tinged his manner.

"If it weren't so obviously untrue, I'd like to console myself with the old proverb, 'Lucky at cards unlucky in love,' Amber, but on the face of it——" He glanced towards Jessamy and away again, and raised his eye-

brows with a smiling significance which made Nanetty, at least, want to strike him across the face. "However, I'm not going to be daunted. You must give us our revenge. Such luck can't last for ever, eh, Jessamy?"

"No, of course not," Jessamy answered, two bright spots of excitement burning in her cheeks. "Our luck must turn. I'm going to twist my chair round three times. I've heard that that helps to turn one's luck."

The two men smiled as Jessamy got up and solemnly turned her chair round three times. Nanetty sat with her hands on the table, her grey eyes staring, her mouth queerly compressed.

"Fetish-worshipper!" said Grote softly.

Jessamy's flush deepened as she remembered how he had once called her that when she had given him a mascot for his car. He was determined to let her forget nothing. Well, why should he, if they were going to be friends?

"We'll see," she answered. "I'll cut first for deal this time."

They cut again, and the deal fell to Yule.

Jessamy's propitiation of the God of Chance showed no sign of meeting with the approval of altered fortunes. She and her partner lost steadily, and continued to lose. At the end of the second rubber Nanetty pushed back her chair.

"I'm not going to play any more," she said. "I never won like this in my life before."

"Nor I," said Yule, uncomfortably.

"No?" queried Grote, taking up the cards and letting them slip through his fingers. "There's no accounting for the vagaries of chance."

"Blind chance," echoed Nanetty.

"Blind chance," Grote echoed idly. "It's getting late, Amber. Let me settle up and be off." Suddenly his face altered. He laid down the cards on the table.

"We haven't been playing with the marked pack, by any chance, I suppose?" he said.

"Oh, no."

"Of course not."

"What difference would that make?"

The three exclamations came almost simultaneously from Jessamy, Yule and Nanetty.

Then Yule's hand shot out and gathered up the cards from the table. He ran his fingers lightly over their surfaces and his face changed.

"By Jove, we have!" he exclaimed. "How on earth did that happen? I'd have sworn I put the marked pack on the chimney-piece. Jessamy ——"

But Jessamy had already reached up for the other pack and handed it to him. Yule took the cards out of their case and ran them through his fingers. His face showed annoyance and a slight bewilderment, but nothing more, to the three pairs of eyes that were watching it.

"Well, that *is* an odd thing," he said in a disturbed tone. "I'd have sworn —— I'm awfully sorry, Grote, but as Nanetty said, of course it made no difference."

"No, of course not," Grote returned smoothly. "You must have mistaken the packs."

"Yes, but how?" Yule persisted. "I'd have sworn ——"

"One can't account for these little mistakes. Look here, Amber, I really must settle up and be off. It's going on for midnight." Grote glanced at the clock. "Let me see. How much exactly have I lost?"

"Nothing," said Nanetty curtly. "To me, anyhow."

"Oh, nonsense, Miss Cotes. It was by the merest mistake that we played with those marked cards. You really must ——"

"Good God, man," cried Yule with a suddenly whitened face. "Surely you don't think ——"

"Of course not, Amber," said Grote rising. "As I

said it was the silly sort of mistake that might have happened to anybody ——"

"No, not to anybody. Only to Yule Amber," thrust in Nanetty, her hand on the back of her chair, her eyes fixed on Grote's face.

"Why only to Yule?" cried Jessamy sharply, beginning to feel discomfited by the absurd episode. "What do you mean?"

"Because Yule is the sort of fool to whom these things do happen," said Nanetty with a queer little smile, half proud, half bitter.

"Really, Nanetty ——" began Jessamy indignantly.

Grote cut in. "It seems to me that we are making a mountain out of a molehill. No one attributes Amber's luck to playing with marked cards. It's too absurd to think of. I insist on paying up."

"Nonsense, Grote. You don't imagine that I'd touch a penny of that money? I hate winning money in any case, especially in my own house. It was, as you say, just a stupid mistake, but I'm going to take sufficient advantage of it to cry quits over this game."

"You must give me another opportunity, then?" said Grote, giving in with an apparent good grace. "Your luck tonight may not always last. Perhaps it is I who will be in a position to cry quits next time."

"I hope so," returned Yule courteously. "Will you have a whiskey and soda before you go?"

To Nanetty's over-strained nerves there seemed to be a deeper undercurrent beneath this exchange of civilities. She read a sinister meaning into Grote's trivialities, even into his acceptance of Yule's hospitable offer.

"I'll get the glasses," she said hastily. "Mrs. Daylight has gone to bed."

"And I'll fetch the whiskey, if you'll excuse me," Yule added.

Silence, weighted and sharp-edged, fell upon the two they left behind for more than half the brief period of

their solitude. Then Grote, looking towards Jessamy with humorously raised brows said, in a tone of mild expostulation:

"Really, Jess! . . . A woman who fakes pictures, and a man who plays bridge with marked cards——!"

"They don't cheat, either of them," cried Jessamy, the flames of colour leaving her cheeks as suddenly as if they had been blown out.

"I never said they did, my dear. But you might have chosen——"

"I didn't choose." The words seemed forced from her. "No. That's not true. I did."

"Blind chance again," Grote murmured, shaking his head.

"I thought you said there was no such thing."

"I don't believe there is, either. It's fate, Jess, fate. . . . And tomorrow you'll ring up Claire."

"I'm not on the telephone."

"Go to see her, then. I'll prepare her."

"I don't want to go."

"Let her come here if you prefer it."

"Oh, no, no." All at once Jessamy felt that she could not face another intrusion of her old life into her new one.

"Silly little thing!" said Grote softly, as he had said it a hundred times before.

Jessamy, remembering, and thrilling to his tenderness, knew that the old life had rushed back upon her like a tidal wave and was sweeping her before it: whither? She did not pause to question. She imagined that she rode on its crest and that she need go no farther than she would.

She was as ignorant of the strength of a tidal wave as she was about most other great forces.

"Jess," Grote went on, "would you like me to call here for you tomorrow and take you to Tudor Lodge?"

"Yes. Oh, yes."

"Then I'll be round at half-past three. I'll drop you there in time for tea."

"No don't drop me. Come with me," cried Jessamy on an impulse. "It would make things easier if you were there."

"Would it? Then, of course I'll go with you. I'd do anything in the world that would make things easier for you, Jess. You know that, don't you?"

"Yes," murmured Jessamy, looking away as the others entered with the necessaries for the guest's stirrup-cup. Then another impulse seized her. She must begin as she meant to go on. She would have no secrecies, no concealments from Yule. They had promised to be absolutely straight with one another. She wasn't going to be the first to break that promise. "Yule, Lucas is going to call for me tomorrow afternoon in his car to take me to Tudor Lodge," she said quickly.

"Good," said Yule. "I'm very glad you're going."

He turned a face so illumined with love and trust upon the girl that Nanetty could have cried aloud.

"Won't you come too, Amber?" suggested Grote.

Yule shook his head. "Better for Jessamy to get the first interview over alone. I'll go another day, if Mrs. Wyatt is kind enough to ask me. I'd like greatly to meet her again."

"Oh, Yule, you *are* a fool!" cried Nanetty's heart so loudly that she wondered that the rest did not hear.

XV

The episode of the marked cards rankled more in the women's minds than in the man's.

It rankled in Jessamy's because, though she knew that for Yule to cheat at cards was an utter impossibility, she felt sorry that such a stupid mistake should have been made in Lucas's presence. It seemed to her vitally necessary for the reconstruction of their friendship that

she should have as much justification for her mad action as possible, and the only justification upon which she could take her stand was the absolute integrity of those with whom she had linked her life. They had not anything else, of course, no money, no position, no power except the power of their honesty and goodness. Even of that power they would be bereft in Lucas's eyes if he believed that Nanetty wilfully faked pictures for a living or that Yule deliberately played cards with a marked pack. Such a thought would tarnish the golden shield behind which she meant to shelter . . . from what? She did not ask herself.

She was suddenly conscious of an intense weariness when Lucas had gone and Yule came back from locking the front door: an overwhelming desire to be alone, to escape from Nanetty's watchful eyes and Yule's yearning ones. Nevertheless, there was tribute to be paid first, well-earned, fairly-won tribute.

Nanetty was moving towards the door as Yule entered. Jessamy took a step forward and faced them both.

"I — I'm too tired to discuss things tonight, but I want to thank you — especially you, Yule, for your kindness and courtesy to my guest this evening."

"I was neither kind nor courteous," snapped Nanetty sitting down suddenly on the nearest chair.

"No. I know you weren't. I think I know why, too," said Jessamy stiffening. "But *you* were, Yule. You were really charming, and I am most grateful to you."

"But, Jessamy dear, your guests are mine, your friends mine, too, I hope. I am more glad than I can say that you are going to be reconciled to your — Mrs. Wyatt again. You must always have any one you wish here. It's your house — our house," he corrected himself with a little smile that wrung Nanetty's heart. "And you mustn't be grateful. That's just the one thing I can't stand."

"God knows you stand enough," thought Nanetty, as Jessamy, with a deprecating, "Oh, but I am. I can't help it," slipped out of the room, leaving the cousins together.

"Go after her, Yule," said Nanetty gruffly.

"I? . . . Why? She doesn't want me."

"Go after her and take her. She's yours. It's your right."

Yule's thin face reddened painfully. "Cave-man again?" he queried in a hard tone. "No, thanks, Nanetty."

"Grote is a cave-man."

"What do you mean?"

"Just what I say. He hasn't your scruples, either, you — you — anachronism!"

"Thanks. I'm glad you credit me with decent instincts."

"Grote has primitive instincts. Yule — he changed those packs of cards deliberately."

Yule swung round to face her, his eyes incredulous. "Nanetty! . . . Did you see him?"

"No. But I didn't need to. I know he did."

Yule laughed. "My dear old thing, you're letting your imagination run away with you. Why on earth should he do a thing like that?"

"To discredit you in Jessamy's eyes."

"Nanetty, nonsense. As if any one who knew me would believe — no decent person ——"

"Grote isn't a decent person."

"Nanetty, you're prejudiced. I think Grote has proved himself to be an awfully decent fellow. Look at the way he behaved tonight ——"

"I've spent my evening looking," thrust in Nanetty grimly.

Yule went on as if she had not spoken. "No one but a really first-rate chap could have faced such a situation as he faced it. It might have been — in fact it was —

deuced awkward for most of us, yet look at the extraordinarily natural way in which it all went off!"

"I tell you I've been looking," repeated Nanetty.

"Well?"

"Well?" She faced him defiantly. "Go after Jessamy, I tell you."

Yule shrugged his shoulders with a new impatience and turned away, reddening as he always did at the suggestion.

"You're being absurd, Nanetty, if not positively offensive. Grote is a decent chap, I tell *you*. I was a fool — you were quite right there, my dear — not to notice that we were playing with the wrong pack of cards, but I never once thought of such a thing. In any case, the marks are so slight that one would be unlikely to notice them unless one searched for them."

"Ah!" Nanetty pounced on the admission as cat on mouse. "Grote must have deliberately looked for them, then!"

"Why should he do that if he knew they were there?"

"A little piece of acting."

"My dear Nanetty!"

"My dear Yule!" Nanetty frowned, then gave a great sigh of exasperation. "It is no use to pray that you may be given a little sense before you die!"

"I hope not," answered Yule with a provoking cheerfulness. "If by sense you mean the capacity for suspecting innocent people of vile motives and nosing out evil where it does not exist."

"Then God help you, for I can't," cried Nanetty. "I'm going to bed. Goodnight — bat!"

"Goodnight — cave-woman!" he responded.

But when Nanetty had gone Yule went over to the corner of the couch where Jessamy had sat and threw himself down there, pressing his cheek against the cushion where her head had lain. He lay there for a long time without stirring, his eyes fixed unseeingly on the

fire, which gradually died to a grey wood-ash in whose core a rosy ember still glowed.

When at last he raised his head his face looked worn, his eyes sunken, and his thoughts were still on Jessamy.

Why did Nanetty torment him with her impossible suggestions? Didn't she know how he suffered? . . . Or was that why? . . .

"Could she possibly be right?" he wondered for one breathless moment: then he thrust the maddening temptation behind him with a quick revulsion of feeling. "No, no, no! I'm not going to spoil the most beautiful thing in the world by snatching at it roughly. I'd only bruise it, rub its bloom off. . . . Nanetty doesn't really understand. How could she, after all? . . . Poor old Nanetty!"

He rose, stretched out his arms, and betook himself to a bed that was all too often sleepless.

How could it be otherwise with that drawn sword between him and his heart's desire.

As for the card episode he never gave it another thought. He dropped it, with Nanetty's ridiculous suspicions, into the well of things forgotten.

XVI

Next morning Jessamy awoke to a confused sense that something had happened, something, like most happenings in daily life, at once pleasant and unpleasant. When realization followed, as it did swiftly, she burrowed down among her pillows, childishly seized by a sudden temptation to shirk the immediate issues by staying in bed for her breakfast.

The incredible occurrences of the previous evening flashed before her mind in vivid colours.

"Is it possible that this time yesterday everything was going on just as usual?" she thought, burrowing still further down in her bed with a little excited shiver.

She was incapable at the moment of clear thinking. The fact of her reconciliation with Lucas overpowered all else. There was a poignant sweetness in being at peace with him once more, in having banished all bitterness from her thoughts of him. It even took some of the sting out of her apprehensions at the prospect of meeting Claire.

"I'd sooner face the dentist," Jessamy decided. "But it's got to be done. I mustn't shirk. I'm not going to run away from anything ever again. As for my friendship with Lucas——" she paused on the thought. "I know that some people would think it a risky experiment——" Jessamy felt very old and worldly-wise as she admitted this to herself—"But if Yule approves (and he seems to do so) it doesn't matter two straws about any one else. It isn't as if I were a child, as if I hadn't been through the mill already."

She came to the surface again and flung her arms outside the bedclothes, thinking with a thrill of the vista which this readjusted friendship with Grote opened before her.

Life was monotonously grey at Caroline Place. The coming of Lucas would brighten the texture of her days as it had done at Tudor Lodge. She saw no danger, no menace to her peace of mind in such a prospect: partly because of her youthful ignorance and partly because her brief love-affair had been a thing of glamour rather than passion. The deep places, the primal instincts in her nature were still untouched. It was not passion she desired, it was thrill, colour, movement: the glamour back again in a life suddenly stripped bare of illusion.

How long the idyllic comradeship she pictured was going to content a man of Grote's temperament she did not pause to think. She was content to take what sweets the moment proffered, careless of the possibility of their proving to be "Dead Sea fruits, that tempt the eye, But turn to ashes on the lips."

She lingered so long over her dreams and visions that she was late for the nine o'clock breakfast that was Yule's compensation for years of enforced early hours.

As she entered the rather dark little dining-room, with a smiling apology, it seemed to Yule that an aura of sunlight came with her.

"I'm on the track of an inspiration," he cried gaily. "The kiddies last night—'Some new love of lovely things.' They really *were* lovely, Jessamy. I wish you had seen them."

He stopped rather abruptly, suddenly remembering their queer intangible difference on the subject, which had been momentarily wiped from his mind by his absorption in the children's happy innocence and bright-eyed joy.

Jessamy checked a desire to retort that the little Waldrons seemed very ordinary children to her. She did not want to pursue any cactus-prickly subjects on this first morning of her new life.

"I can't screw up any regrets at not having gone to the party last evening. If I had——" she stopped as abruptly as Yule had done.

But there were no cactus-prickles for Yule in the subject of Jessamy's visitor, except in so far as they related to Nanetty's prejudices and suspicions. He returned in an absolutely natural tone:

"I forgot that. Of course you'd have missed Grote if you'd come. That would have been a pity."

"It would, indeed," Jessamy echoed; while Nanetty, apparently absorbed in her newspaper, cried in her heart —"Oh, Yule, you *are* a fool!"— for about the hundredth time.

Yule pushed back his chair and rose.

"I'm frightfully keen to see if I can work out that idea. You'll excuse me, won't you?"

His eyes were on Jessamy. Nanetty needed no apologies.

"Of course. I've nearly finished, too. I'm not particularly hungry this morning."

"No?" queried Nanetty.

It was the first word she had spoken so far, and though it bore a rather disagreeable tang to Jessamy's ears, it left her quite unprepared for the bolt that followed.

When Yule had left the room Nanetty put down the paper behind which she had kept herself carefully entrenched and faced Jessamy with hard, accusatory eyes.

"Jessamy, when are you going to give him a child of his own?" she asked.

Jessamy's face flamed as if Nanetty had slapped it. She was breathless, wordless, as she tried to cover herself with the tatters of her rent dignity.

"Really, Nanetty! . . . I don't think. . . . Surely that is. . . . I don't really see. . . . After all, it's no business of yours."

"Anything that concerns Yule is my business."

"But that . . . that isn't . . . That doesn't . . . concern Yule."

"Who else, may I ask?"

"Me."

"It concerns you both, as I see it, and ——"

"And no one else," returned Jessamy, plucking up spirit. "I — I won't be asked indecent questions by you, Nanetty."

"You can't help being asked them, but of course you can refuse to answer them. I'm getting quite used to being called indecent. I don't mind it in the least."

"Perhaps you'd mind being called a cheat," said Jessamy, suddenly losing her temper.

Nanetty started. "Certainly I should. No one living has the right to call me that."

"No one? Then it isn't true that you deliberately fake old masters for Julius Brand?" It was out now!

Jessamy felt that the thing had to be faced and proved, once for all, false or true. Even in her absorption in her own affairs, Nanetty's answer still seemed to matter surprisingly.

"Fake old masters? What on earth do you mean?" Nanetty sprang up and gripped the back of her chair so hard that her knuckles gleamed white.

"Then you don't know that old Brand subjects your copies to a special process of his own and sells them as originals?" cried Jessamy on a note of relief.

Nanetty paled. She looked suddenly old and hard and grim. Her narrowed eyes shot sparks as she said in a low tone of concentrated anger: "You were never nearer having your ears boxed in your life!"

Jessamy felt an instant lightening of her spirits. Nanetty's fire left her unscorched. Rather it shrivelled the dross of her thoughts, leaving only the pure gold of her faith in the things that mattered. She cried joyously:

"I felt that it couldn't be true. I knew ——"

"What put such an idea into your head?"

"Lucas said ——"

"Ah, it was that cad, Grote! Not content with trying to discredit Yule in your eyes he must needs besmirch me too. How mean! How vile!"

Nanetty leaned with both hands on the back of the chair as if she felt a sudden need of support.

"No, no, Nanetty, you mustn't say that. Lucas didn't —— He thought I knew."

"Knew what? That I was a cheat and a liar? Thank you."

"No, no. About the pictures, I mean."

Jessamy looked pleadingly at the figure which seemed to have been turned to stone. As she looked, Nanetty's rigidity broke, a flame of anger quivering through her once more.

"I must get to the bottom of this. Is what you say

true of old Brand? It is really possible that he does this — this dirty discreditable thing?"

"I'm afraid it is," Jessamy faltered. "Don't you remember what I once told you about the Dutch picture at Tudor Lodge?"

"My God, yes!" Nanetty jerked the chair round and sank heavily on it. "I remember it well, and how hot we both grew over it! . . . Then this old devil has made a tool of me, has prostituted my one poor little talent — oh, my God!" She gave a choked cry and, leaning her arm along the back of the chair, hid her face against it.

Jessamy ran to her. "Dear old Nanetty! My dear, I never really believed it. I knew you wouldn't — couldn't ——"

Nanetty raised a white tearless face.

"Thanks," she said dully. "If you knew me at all. . . . Any one who *did* know me. . . . Of course, that man Grote ——"

Jessamy stiffened. "Lucas Grote meant no harm."

"Didn't he? I don't trust him. You didn't trust him, either, that first day you came to us. Oh, Jessamy, do be careful. Don't play with fire. It's madness for you to have anything to do with that man after what has been between you." Nanetty forgot her own hurt for the moment in contemplation of the girl's danger, and with it, the menace to Yule.

"There is only friendship between us now."

"Don't talk rubbish," cried Nanetty rudely. "That's the stuff he has been trying to fool you with, I suppose. A man of his type has no use for friendship with a girl of yours. Don't believe it for an instant."

"I think you must let me judge of that for myself," answered Jessamy stiffly, her sympathy merging into annoyance.

"He's begun already, I see," said Nanetty bitterly.

"Begun what?"

"Alienating you from us. Sowing seeds of distrust and suspicion between you and us. He doesn't know us, of course. It might have been as possible that Yule should cheat at cards as that I should cheat with my pictures ——"

"He never thought Yule cheated at cards," cried Jessamy, pricked at the way in which Nanetty ranged herself with Yule on the one side, leaving her very definitely on the other.

"Perhaps not. . . . But I'm convinced that he changed the packs so that you might think ——"

"Nanetty, how dare you? . . . Did you see him do it?"

"No, but ——"

"Then you've no right whatsoever to make such an accusation. You're very ready to resent any suspicion of your own motives. Why be so quick to accuse another person just because you don't happen to like him?" Jessamy's great dark eyes were as fiery as Nanetty's own had been.

Nanetty met and returned her gaze defiantly for a moment. Then she flung out her thin hands with a little hopeless gesture and gave in, suddenly broken.

"I'm sorry, Jessamy. It was instinct rather than reason which prompted me. Perhaps I'm wrong. I hope so. Instinct may play us false sometimes in revenge for the way in which we so constantly ignore our intuitions." She rose, pushing the chair aside. "All the same, I beg of you to be careful, Jessamy. There's danger, terrible danger in this playing at Platonics."

Jessamy thought, with a half contemptuous pity: "Poor old Nanetty, what does she know about it?" Aloud she said: "You needn't be uneasy, Nanetty. I'm not a child."

"But that's just what you are!" groaned Nanetty. "A child in your ignorance of the very ABC of masculine nature."

"That's nonsense," said Jessamy, reddening. "Even Yule ——"

"You can't judge other men by Yule. He's an anachronism, born out of his era. Besides ——"

"Well, what are you going to do about this picture business?" Jessamy hastily changed the subject.

"Do? I hardly know. Give that old devil a piece of my mind first, and then ——"

"And then?"

"See what turns up. The bottom seems to have dropped out of my world, somehow."

"In what way?"

"Don't you know that I've a contract with old Brand to sell him all my work for the next two years? That blocks me absolutely, for if I don't work for him I can't work for any one else until that time is up. I've no money of my own. I'm altogether dependent on what I earn."

"Oh, you poor thing!" cried Jessamy, sympathetic again. "But if old Brand promised to sell your pictures only as copies ——"

Nanetty's laugh jangled through the quiet room. "Do you really think I'd work for that old cheat again? I'd rather starve first. Besides I can always go out as a charwoman. The demand still exceeds the supply, I believe."

"Nanetty! . . . But Yule and I have plenty ——"

"You needn't rub it in," said Nanetty bitterly, as she went to the door.

In spite of herself she turned back on the threshold to see Jessamy standing still like a child who has been hurt, her head bent, her lips quivering.

"There, there, I'm a cranky old thing," she cried half crossly, half deprecatingly. "Don't mind me, Jessamy. I'm sore still.

"Any kindness just now is like salt on a wound. I feel spiritually soiled, too. I think I'll go and cleanse

my soul by having it out with the Brand that certainly deserves burning."

With the pitiful attempt at a jest she was gone, fleeing to her lair with the instinct of the wounded animal; leaving Jessamy to a state of mental perturbation which was lighted by one clear, unalterable ray: her restored faith in the honesty of this woman whom she had trusted from the first.

XVII

JESSAMY tapped at Yule's door and entered. The bare untidy slip of a room was full of sunshine. Outside, across the road the river sparkled. Sparrows chattered in the plane-trees, immensely absorbed in their own affairs as usual.

"Sorry for disturbing you," she said, as Yule looked up from his table questioningly. "How is the inspiration going?"

"Rottenly," answered Yule, covering up his block and the rough sketches that were scattered about the table. "Sorry for not showing you what I've done, but I simply loathe letting any one see my first attempts."

"Even me?"

"Even you." He smiled as he said it, and there in the strong sunlight Jessamy noticed for the first time how thin his face was and how deeply the patient lines about his mouth were scored.

She hesitated before she spoke again, not knowing exactly how to frame what she had come to say.

"Look here, Yule," she began at last, drawing lines on the table with her fore-finger. "It's all right about my going to Tudor Lodge today with Lucas, isn't it?"

"What do you mean, dear? I thought that was all settled."

"So it was, but — but Nanetty unsettled me again, rather."

Yule winced, and his brows drew together quickly.

"Don't mind Nanetty. She's a dear old thing, but full of prejudices."

Jessamy's face cleared. "Then you think it all right that Lucas and I can be friends?"

Yule hesitated, trying to see the situation from all points of view. He wanted to prove to her yet again how he loved and trusted her: he wanted to help her, not hinder her: above all he wanted her to be happy.

"How do you feel yourself about it, Jessamy? Do you think it's safe" he asked quietly.

Jessamy's head went up. "Of course it's safe. I'm not likely to forget that I'm your wife. I thought you trusted me, Yule?"

"Of course I trust you, my dear."

"Lucas quite understands."

"Then that's that. You know I always wanted you to get in touch with your old life again."

"If you're satisfied, Yule, no one else has any right to interfere."

"Nanetty doesn't mean to interfere. It's only because ——"

"Oh, I know she does it from the best of motives," interrupted Jessamy rebelliously. "But I'm just a little tired of being treated and looked upon as a child, and I wanted to get this quite clear between you and me. . . . You'll come to Tudor Lodge when, or if Claire asks you, won't you?"

"With pleasure, I should like to meet that charming lady again."

Jessamy sighed. "Claire *is* clever. I wish the meeting were over. I dread it. I don't know what to say to her."

"Just say you're sorry for having hurt her," Yule suggested after a moment. "You know it wasn't a kind thing to run away as you did."

"I suppose it wasn't, but ——"

"Have you ever regretted it?" asked Yule, rather low. "Coming to me, I mean?"

Jessamy pondered. "No. I don't think I really have. I still have a sense of peace, of security in our marriage — our queer made marriage that the wiseacres mocked at, but which has turned out so surprisingly well!"

Her spirits rose at Yule's reasonableness. . . . He really was rather a dear, in spite of being the anachronism Nanetty was so fond of calling him. He was surprisingly modern in his attitude towards the present situation, though . . . Jessamy bent and dropped a light kiss on top of his head.

"You're rather a nice person, you know, Yule," she said as she slipped away.

But for quite a long time after she had gone Yule did not feel at all a nice person. His pulses raced and his temples throbbed at her careless caress until he felt as if his head would burst. He pushed away his sketches with a groan.

"Yet, after all, if I didn't let her see that I trusted her I should give Grote all the glamour of the forbidden. It isn't worth while risking that," he ended a long mental argument. "She must trust me. She must know that I trust her. That's essential. The point is, can I trust Grote to play the game? If he doesn't . . ." Yule got up suddenly and went to the window, his hands thrust deep in his pockets. "Is Nanetty right and am I wrong?" he wondered, with a sudden new uneasiness. "Would I really come into my own if I played the caveman and clubbed Jessamy into submission? . . . Grote probably would. He's that type. I'm not. No, I must be true to myself. I must live my life as I see it, not as any one else sees it. I can't grab at the most beautiful thing in the world and risk finding it all spoiled and broken in my hands. Jessamy trusts me. I'm not going to fail her. After all, that's what matters most,

that I shouldn't fail her. Nanetty . . ." A smile crept about the corners of his mouth. . . . "Dear old thing, what does she know of love? She theorizes largely in her blunt way, but what does she really know?"

PART III

DAYLIGHT

PART III

DAYLIGHT

I

THROUGHOUT the dragging hours Jessamy visualized a dozen different versions of her meeting with Claire, all equally trying, equally difficult.

As half-past three approached she grew more and more nervous. The simile of the dentist's chair was the only one that at all adequately fitted the case, for she was filled with all the ghastly apprehensions, the deadly incertitudes that beset the human mind at such a moment.

"If only it were over!" she sighed one instant: and the next, "If only it need never come!"

Her meeting with Lucas — the ravening wolf of Nanetty's imagination! — took on an altered aspect; an aspect which seemed to cheapen the gold of the earlier glamour to a mere pinchbeck.

"Why will people complicate things so?" she thought with a sudden exasperation. "Why don't we take life simply, as I'm sure it's meant to be taken?" The thought struck her: "Yule takes life simply enough. He sees things clearly. He really *is* rather a dear."

Then she forgot all else at the sound of a motor-engine, purring on its relentless way towards Caroline Place. An instant later Grote had brought his fawn-coloured two-seater to a standstill outside the door of No. 3.

Jessamy waved to him from the drawing-room window and ran out on to the steps before he had time to ring.

"Hallo! What a punctual little woman!" said Grote cheerily, looking at her in the way that had always made her feel subtly pleased with herself.

"Wasn't I always punctual?" countered Jessamy, smiling, with a sudden revulsion of relief.

Gone were her apprehensions. The known, the familiar lapped her about comfortably at sight of both car and man. There was nothing but a warm friendliness in Lucas's tone. What a fool she had been to worry herself so unnecessarily! Perhaps the dreaded meeting with Claire would not be so trying after all. Anticipations were generally worse than the reality. Grote's next words were reassuring.

"I rang Claire up this morning. She's longing to see you."

"Good," said Jessamy, striving for self-confidence.

He helped her into the car, tucking the rug round her with all his old solicitude. Insensibly her spirits rose. It really was delightful to be in a private car again, and Grote's was the last word in comfort. She nestled down on the luxuriously-sprung seat, patting the soft rug with a childish pleasure.

Amber, roused by the sound of the car, watched them from his window.

"She must feel free, absolutely free," he thought. "She must taste her old life again, and then . . . and then. . . ."

The car started, sweeping her swiftly out of his range of vision, but not out of his thoughts.

Grote and Jessamy spoke but little on the way to Tudor Lodge. Brief snatches of dialogue were all that the exigencies of steering through the traffic permitted.

"It's good to have you in the car again, Jess."

"It's good to be here," Jessamy answered.

After a while Grote said:

"You're thinner than you were, child."

"Am I?"

"Yes — but lovelier than ever."

"Oh, nonsense, Lucas."

"Sober sense, Jess."

"Don't you think compliments ought to be taboo?"

"No. . . . Why?"

"Oh, I don't know."

"Nor I. Besides, that wasn't a compliment. It was the truth. You're not going to run away from the truth again, are you?"

"No. I'm never going to run away from anything again," Jessamy declared, drawing a long breath. "But let's forget all that."

"How can we?"

"No. . . . I suppose we can't."

"Not while you wear Amber's ring."

Jessamy suddenly clasped her left hand with the right. She had almost forgotten Yule, so completely had the past laid its spell upon her. In all her imaginings she had left out one important factor: the power of old associations; a power which had gripped her from the moment she entered Grote's car. Its hold was still upon her as they sped through the familiar roads of Hampstead and turned in at the gates of Tudor Lodge.

The sight of the trim garden, the low cream-coloured house, brought a mist to Jessamy's eyes, so poignant was this sudden return to the past, so unexpected its effect. She could scarcely respond to the parlourmaid's smiling welcome: but Grote filled the hiatus.

"You mustn't call her Miss Jessamy any longer. She's Mrs. Amber now."

"I forgot, ma'am. Mrs. Wyatt is in the drawing-room. She asked me to say would you kindly wait in the library, sir."

Jessamy turned quickly to Grote with a look of appeal.

"No, no, Lucas, you've got to come with me. You promised."

"All right. Of course I'll come." Grote's smile held a hint of triumph. "Claire will understand."

Jessamy's heart thudded as she followed the maid

across the familiar black-and-white tiled hall. Grote gave her fingers a quick little squeeze as she passed into the warm-scented drawing-room, seeing nothing but Claire's tall figure waiting by the fire. As they entered she turned with outstretched arms.

Jessamy had no idea that Claire had modelled her attitude (with a somewhat ironic appreciation of its implications) upon Lord Leighton's well-known picture of Demeter awaiting the return of Persephone from the Under World. She was only aware of the half tender, half reproachful smile, the wistful uncertainty of the lips that moved to a low-toned:

"Jessamy — dearest!"

"Claire, oh, Claire!"

With a little cry Jessamy ran forward. In a moment she was sobbing her heart out on Claire's shoulder, Claire's white hand on her abased head.

"Go away, Lucas. We don't want you," said Mrs. Wyatt softly.

Her eyes met Grote's and said: "You may safely leave her to me."

His responded: "You're a wonderful woman."

He went quietly away. The two women were scarcely conscious of the gently closing door. Claire bent her lips to Jessamy's ear.

"My child, why did you do such a thing?"

It was her one reproach.

"I don't know. I was mad," sobbed Jessamy, forgetful of her own hurts, her own wounded dignity, and feeling only like a lost child who has suddenly been found and taken home again. "I'm sorry. . . . I'm sorry, Claire. Can you forgive me?"

"Dear child. I forgave you the moment I knew that you were safe."

"Oh, Claire! Claire!"

Gradually the storm spent itself. Jessamy's sobs stilled at last to quickly caught breaths. Claire dried the

reddened lids with her own fine handkerchief. Its well-remembered perfume drew the past still closer about the girl. Caroline Place and Yule Amber seemed shut out, far away, almost non-existent. It was Claire herself who brought them back.

"Sit here on the couch with your back to the light and tell me anything you care to," she said, piling the soft cushions behind Jessamy at the most comfortable angle. "You know that I'm the last person in the world to kick against the inevitable, so let us take everything that has happened for granted and start afresh. Your husband ——" she saw, but ignored Jessamy's slight start at the word —"Mr. Amber can't have told you how much I liked him, for I don't believe he knew it himself. He really is the quaintest, most ingenuous person, Jessamy."

"Yes, isn't he?" echoed Jessamy, relieved and pleased at Claire's praise of Yule.

Mrs. Wyatt, with unerring intuition had said the one thing best calculated to remove awkwardness and put their new relations upon an easy footing. Her tacit acceptance of Amber, her assumption of future mutual friendliness, reassured the girl as nothing else would have done.

"How could I have misunderstood Claire so dreadfully?" Jessamy thought, with the pendulum-swing of youth's remorse. "She, too, takes things simply, as people ought always to take them, but don't." Aloud she continued: "Yule Amber is the best man I've ever come across, I think. I can't tell you how good he has been to me, how chivalrous."

"Chivalrous?" Mrs. Wyatt was caught, as Grote had been, by the word. "How was he chivalrous to you, Jessamy? Forgive me for asking, dear, but you must remember that I know little or nothing about your marriage except the bare fact. I didn't even know that you knew Mr. Amber ——"

"But I didn't," Jessamy blurted out. "Oh, Claire,

I'd better tell you everything and let us start afresh, as you said."

"Tell me just what you wish, dear child."

Had Claire probed for information it was possible that Jessamy — being very human — might have felt impelled to withhold it. Her apparent lack of curiosity caused Jessamy's confidence to rush forth in a flood.

When the girl had ended her confession, with flaming cheeks and drooped lids, Claire looked at her very gravely, shocked at the dangers she had risked.

"Jessamy, my dear, it was surely your guardian angel who led Yule Amber to you that night."

"Oh, Claire, do you believe in guardian angels?"

"I believe in prowling human beasts," Mrs. Wyatt returned. "You mad, foolish child, you don't know what you have escaped. I shudder to think of it. But for that man you don't know into what abyss you might have fallen . . . where you might be now. I had only pictured some clandestine acquaintance. I never dreamed. . . . Good God, Yule Amber has placed us under a life-long obligation!"

Jessamy looked at her from beneath her wet lashes, only half-understanding.

"Yule?" she said, in a tone of surprise.

"Yes, Yule. . . . I didn't know that there were such men."

"His cousin Nanetty calls him an anachronism."

"He must be," returned Claire dryly.

She got up and walked to the window, a striking figure in the black gown that showed off her silvery fairness so effectively.

Indeed Jessamy's story, convincing in its very artlessness, had really shaken her. In her younger days she had known something of the seamy side of life, enough to make her realize the risks that Jessamy had run in her mad flight. Jessamy leaned back among the cushions wondering what Claire would say next. She had a sud-

den childish longing to get scenes and explanations over and be friends again, as she put it to herself.

Her eyes wandered round the loved familiar room, luxurious in every detail, warm and scented with the fragrance of white lilac today. It was a delightful room, certainly . . . Jessamy stirred a little uneasily. . . . Was it possible that it felt the least bit too warm, too luxurious, too strongly scented, after the cool austerities of Caroline Place?

Claire swung round again from the window.

"Then you only made a tool of Yule Amber!" she said, a faint ring of accusation in her tone.

"I — suppose so."

"What made him willing to be used by you?"

"He — he said he loved me."

"He loved you!" Claire echoed. "Yes, he said that to me, too. What witchery have you, child, to enable you to capture men's hearts as you do? . . . Lucas also loves you, you know. He loves you so much that he is willing to accept whatever fragments of friendship you can give him. You know that, don't you?"

Claire sat down on the couch again and took Jessamy's hand in hers.

"Yes. I know that. He told me so yesterday. Everything is straight between us now. We are going to — to start again."

Claire sighed. "You are a lucky girl. One so seldom has the chance of making a fresh start. . . . But about this marriage of yours ——?"

She paused significantly.

Jessamy's cheeks flamed, but she was determined to shirk no truth again, however unpleasant.

"I think you ought to know, Claire, that it isn't — it isn't — an ordinary marriage. Yule and I are only — are only — friends."

"Only friends? . . . And he says he loves you."

"That's why," answered Jessamy confusedly. "He doesn't want — he said he wouldn't ask ——"

"He must indeed be an anachronism," returned Mrs. Wyatt dryly. "Well, we needn't pursue this delicate subject any further. If yours is one of these semi-detached marriages it will enable me to see all the more of you. You must get in touch with your old friends again. We'll do our best to give you a good time. You must bring Mr. Amber to see me. I'll give some little dinners, arrange some theatre-parties. What have you seen that's on now?"

"I haven't been to the theatre since I left home," Jessamy admitted.

"So much the better," said Claire cheerfully. "There are numbers of plays you must see. There's an excellent one by a new man at the Everyman. You and Mr. Amber must dine here first. Perhaps the cousin would come too. Would she?"

The thought of Nanetty at Tudor Lodge twisted Jessamy's lips to a rather wry smile.

"I'm sure she wouldn't," she answered, to Mrs. Wyatt's surprise. "You needn't be conventional with them, Claire. They won't expect it. They wouldn't know whether what you did was the right thing or the wrong thing. They don't care a pin about what's correct or incorrect. They have got queer standards of their own."

Once the word was out Jessamy hated herself for saying "queer," for speaking of the Ambers as "they," instead of "us," for ranging them on one side (as she had blamed Nanetty for doing) and herself and Claire on the other. What spell had Tudor Lodge cast upon her to make her forget past obligations? She made a valiant effort to retrieve herself.

"It's awfully good of you, dear Claire," she went on. "But I think, perhaps, you had better not bother about us. You and I are friends again, and that's all that

matters. I've got used to the life at Caroline Place. I'd better stick to my groove. Don't unsettle me, please."

Claire smiled and squeezed the hand she held.

"You dear, loyal, foolish child! But of course I must unsettle you, as you call it. It's dreadfully bad for you to get into a groove, and for your nice husband, too. I shan't ask you to do anything that you really don't want to do, but you must let me have the pleasure of seeing you sometimes. You don't know how lonely I've been without you — how often I ——" she broke off suddenly: then went on with a change of tone. "I know that Mr. Amber wanted to have friendly relations between us. Now, didn't he?"

"Yes. . . . From the very first," Jessamy admitted.

"Ah! Then you haven't a leg to stand on, dearest child," smiled Claire. "We'll be such a happy little family together, and you must help me to plan out my little festivities."

In spite of her disclaimer Jessamy brightened at the prospect. She had shut her eyes to the allurement of theatres, concerts, dinners, dances — all the little gaieties in which she had once delighted so whole-heartedly. She had made her conscientious protest, and it had been swept aside. The child was to have its toys again. Life, for the woman, was to be grey no longer, but gay and full of colour once more. She thrilled involuntarily at the thought.

"It sounds delightful," Jessamy murmured.

"It will be delightful, I hope," said Claire. "What a charming *partie carrée* we shall be. Four is such a nice number for going about. You've relieved my mind greatly, Jessamy, about the *gauche* cousin. We certainly don't want her for a spoke in our wheel."

For an instant Claire's French phrases reminded Jessamy of Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe; then she felt that she could not in any way fit Claire into the atmosphere of

Caroline Place. She would not "belong" somehow. Claire and Nanetty, for instance! . . . Jessamy smiled at the thought. She could see her stepmother's lips curling scornfully at Mrs. Daylight's crudities, or at the bouncing Waldron babies, and she knew suddenly that she did not want Claire to come to Caroline Place.

Mrs. Wyatt rose and pressed the bell near the fireplace.

"I'm going to ring for tea and poor, patient Lucas," she said smiling, coupling the meal with the man as if one were as necessary and inevitable as the other. "You must admit that he deserves a little attention now. . . . I've ordered the Russian sandwiches and the almond cakes and drop-scones that you used to love, Jessamy. I hope you have a good appetite, dear."

II

At the sound of Nanetty's latch-key in the hall-door Yule pushed aside his sketches. He had worked feverishly all day, save for the brief disturbances of Jessamy's appearance and disappearance, and now he felt that it was a long time since he had seen any one to speak to.

The house had settled down to a deadly stillness once Grote's car had vanished with Jessamy. It was high time for some human intercourse, Amber felt. He rose, stretched himself, yawned and went out on to the landing with his hands in his pockets.

Nanetty was coming upstairs with a paper bag in her hand. She looked very tired and worn, Amber thought, but her eyes brightened suddenly at sight of him.

"Hallo, you in?" she cried, a note of pleasure in her voice. "I had an idea that you were out." She held up her bag. "I've bought cream buns for tea. Let's have it up in my studio. We can make toast at the gas-fire, if you like."

"Good," cried Yule. "We'll have a picnic. I'll run

down and fetch the tray and bring up a loaf and butter. I didn't realize it, but I believe that's just what I've been wanting."

He went quickly down the stairs and Nanetty heard a cheery voice calling for Emma. She went with quickened steps up to her own domain. The momentary exhilaration of her interview with Julius Brand had faded and the prospect before her was dark indeed.

She had earned enough by her work for him to give her a feeling of independence. To have that source of income absolutely blocked for the next two years made her feel lost and bewildered. There were so few other things she could do. Painting was her one rather unremunerative talent. She had hoped to be able to leave Caroline Place sooner or later. She could not believe that her presence there was really necessary to Yule's happiness. Of late they had seemed but to rasp one another. Yet now — where was she to go? Yule must be told something. She knew that, yet she was loth to do anything that might add to the burden he already had to bear.

She had just spread a gaily-coloured cloth on the end of her studio table, when she heard the edge of the tray knock against the door.

"Coming, coming," she cried, as she ran to open it.

"I've brought everything but the tea," Yule said triumphantly. "Mrs. Daylight is making it."

"I'll have some toast ready by the time you're back."

It did not occur to either of them that they were rather self-consciously trying to re-create a lost atmosphere, to re-capture an old cheerfulness. The result was quite effective for the moment. It lasted until the cream buns and toast were eaten and the final cup of strong tea drunk.

Then silence fell, and Yule felt for his pipe.

Nanetty reached for her packet of Woodbines and lit one.

"I've had a bit of a blow, Yule," she said abruptly.

He looked quickly at her. "I've been wondering what it was."

"You knew, then?"

"Of course I knew there was something wrong, only I didn't know what it was. Tell me, old thing."

"I've just discovered that Brand has been faking my pictures and selling them as originals."

"Nanetty!"

"It's quite true. He didn't make an attempt to deny it. I had the pleasure of telling him to his face what I thought of him, though that's not really very much satisfaction."

"The scoundrel!" Yule forgot to light his pipe in his anger. "What did he say?"

"He had the insolence to suggest that I knew about it all along, and to assume that I would go on working for him until my two years' contract was up."

"But you won't, of course?"

"What do you take me for? . . . All the same, heroics apart, it makes me a pauper at once. I have no other source of income, as you know. Painting is the only thing I can do, and Brand swears he will prosecute me if I attempt to sell my work to any one else but him. . . . He's within his rights, Yule. I told you I had sold ——"

"But, Nanetty, surely you know that what's mine ——"

"No, it isn't," answered Nanetty sharply, but she softened the quick asperity of her refusal with a smile. "I must be independent, boy. At Radnor Terrace at least I earned my keep by looking after the house. Here — look here, Yule. You pay Emma thirty-six pounds a year. Will you pay me the same and let me do her work?"

Yule sprang to his feet.

"I'll see you damned first!" he almost shouted.

Nanetty's eyebrows went up. "Yule, *dear!* Need you be so violent?"

"I need. I must. I want to smash something. I'd like to shake the breath out of your body for even making such a suggestion!"

"Very well, then. Consider it unmade," returned Nanetty calmly. "Sit down and light your pipe and let us talk sense."

"We couldn't very well talk more damnable nonsense."

"Do you really think so?"

"What's money? . . . What's the use of the beastly thing if one can do nothing one wants with it?"

"You can do heaps of things you want with it," Nanetty said. "But won't you be unselfish and let me keep the only thing I've left — my independence?"

"Oh, damn your independence!" growled Yule.

"By all means. . . . Can't you see eye to eye with me about this?"

"What do you want to do? Go out and char?"

"Something like that. . . . Mrs. Chalfont-Smythe was talking to me last night about a rich old lady who wants a really reliable person to look after her birds and take her pet dogs for a walk every day. I was wondering ——"

"I can't see you in an environment of birds and pet dogs," grunted Yule.

"Nor I," admitted Nanetty frankly. "Still it would be an honest livelihood, and better than being a party to a cheat." She suddenly covered her eyes with her hands. "I feel smirched, Yule," she said very low.

He stopped in his pacing up and down the sparsely-furnished room, and went and put his arm round her shoulder.

"You, the cleanest souled, most honourable, whitest of women!" he cried. "You can't — you mustn't feel that, even for an instant."

His warmth, his championship brought balm to her wounds. She raised her head and kissed the thin cheek nearest to her.

"You dear!" she said in a choked voice. Then she cleared her throat and went on: "I'm going to put it all behind me and begin again. You won't put obstacles in my way, Yule?"

"God forbid!" said Amber humbly. "I only want to help you, Nanetty."

"You'll help me best by letting me go my own way."

"How did you find out about this thing?"

Nanetty hesitated, but only for a second. "That man — Grote — told Jessamy. He thought I knew. That was what stung most sharply. It rankles still."

"Jessamy didn't believe it?" The assertion was flung down like a challenge.

"Not altogether. . . . She wasn't quite sure, though. How could she be? She doesn't really know — us."

"She ought to by this time," said Yule fiercely.

"In a way she does, of course, but in another sense we're strangers to her. It must have been a bit of a shock to her when some one out of her past life turns up and amusedly insinuates that one of us fakes pictures and the other owes his luck at cards to playing with a marked pack!"

"Jessamy never believed that."

"Of course she didn't, but on the strength of that little incident she may be more ready to believe the next shady thing that's suggested of us," said Nanetty dryly. "I tell you, Yule, that man is going to fight for her. He wants her, and he means to have her. It's madness on your part ——"

"Listen, dear old thing," interrupted Yule gently, putting a visible restraint on himself. "I must act according to my own lights, whether ——"

"Whether they're marsh lights or not," interrupted Nanetty in her turn. "And leading you to your own destruction."

"I don't believe they're marsh lights."

"No one ever does," retorted Nanetty.

III

Mrs. Wyatt was clever enough not to press her invitation to dinner after Jessamy's first refusal.

"I'd love to stay, Claire," the girl said, rising reluctantly. "But they'll be expecting me at Caroline Place."

"Of course, dear. I quite understand. You're on the telephone, of course?"

"No," Jessamy admitted.

"Ah, then, I must write and arrange an evening for you and — I really must call him Yule ——"

"Please do, Claire."

"You and Yule to come and dine here. I want to go to see you, too, Jessamy, in your new home. I want to be able to picture you in your own surroundings."

"It's a queer old house that was left to Yule by a cousin of his." In spite of her depreciation Jessamy felt a little touch of pride at the thought of her own improvements in that queer old house. Then she suddenly realized how bare and, probably, poverty-stricken it would look to Claire, accustomed as she was to every evidence of wealth in her surroundings. Again she was aware of the fact that she did not wish Claire to come to Caroline Place: but how could she say so?

"We'll fix things up later on. Perhaps — Yule — will let you come and stay here for a few days. You would like to collect your own possessions, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, there are some pictures and ——"

"There are a great many of your belongings still here,

dear — but I shall insist upon your coming to collect them yourself."

"Very well, Claire."

As Jessamy put up her face to be kissed she felt that it was unreal and unnatural for her to be leaving Tudor Lodge at all. Claire seemed to think so, too.

"You're going to take the child back, Lucas?"

"Of course."

Claire turned with a charmingly apologetic air to Jessamy.

"I can't call it home yet, dear. I can't picture any place but Tudor Lodge as your home."

Jessamy looked about her with a strange mingling of feelings. Old loyalties were at war with new.

"It does seem odd to think of it, but Caroline Place really is my home now."

"This will always be your home, dear child. You must look on it as a haven of refuge when the cook gives notice or the other domestics leave you suddenly in the lurch," Claire smiled.

"Oh, good old Daylight isn't likely to give notice," Jessamy returned. "I really must tear myself away now, Claire."

"It's hard to let you go — isn't it, Lucas?"

"We're not letting her go," said Grote, in a comfortingly matter-of-fact tone. "She's come back into our lives for good. She has promised me that she's never going to run away again, haven't you, Jess?"

"Yes," said Jessamy rather low.

In spite of her pleasure in this dear unexpected renewal of the past she had a sudden sense as of something inevitable, something that loomed dimly ahead of her, which she must one day encounter and perhaps conquer . . . or be conquered by. . . . She dismissed the absurd sensation with a little shrug of her shoulders.

"Say good-bye to Claire, then, Lucas, and take me home," she commanded.

Grote opened his lips as if to speak, but a warning glance from Mrs. Wyatt checked him.

"Come along, then," he said. "Goodnight, Claire. See you again sooner or later. I'll ring you up and let you know when I'm coming."

"Do, in case I should be out," returned Mrs. Wyatt, fully understanding that he meant to come back and dine with her once he had left Jessamy at Caroline Place.

As they drove back to Chelsea through the blue spring dusk Jessamy said in rather a small voice:

"I'm glad you're not going back to Tudor Lodge tonight, Lucas."

"Why?"

"Because — somehow — I shouldn't like to think that you and Claire — were discussing me — talking me over."

Grote smiled. "Silly little thing! I don't want to 'talk you over,' as you put it. You're there, Jess, all the time. I don't need to discuss you."

Jessamy felt vaguely reassured.

"I never pretended to you that I was a saint, Jess. Now did I?" asked Grote with a disarming frankness.

"No, Lucas."

"Well, I'm not," he went on. "But ever since I knew you the thought of you kept me straight. When I — lost you — I nearly went off my head. I don't want to go off the rails again, Jess. . . . If you care to — you can still keep me straight. If you just let me see you . . . let me be with you. . . . You don't know what an influence you have over me, you little white thing with stars in your eyes!"

It was the age-old appeal, irresistible to the heart of woman. It came with all the greater force to Jessamy because it seemed to preclude even the faintest disloyalty to her husband. Yule, who was so idealistic, so quixotic even, would surely be willing to cede this grace

to the man who loved her. He, who was so keen on helping other people, on thinking tolerantly of their shortcomings — why, he had already done so: had already acquiesced in the renewal of her friendship with Lucas. Jessamy suddenly realized this with a little leap of her heart.

"Of course I care to help you," she said, a quiver of agitation in her voice. "I — I realize that I treated you badly. I — I know that I have a good deal to make up for. You — you shall have all that I can honourably give you, Lucas."

Grote's lips twitched with quick satisfaction. It was just the frame of mind that he desired to induce in her, but he had scarcely hoped to encompass it so quickly.

"That's all right, little girl."

"And now, Lucas, please," Jessamy continued with a change of tone, "let's forget all these uncomfortable, unhappy things as far as we can. Let us just be nice and ordinary again."

"As if you could ever be ordinary!" returned Grote, with a challenging flash of eyes and teeth.

Jessamy smiled. It was a boldness that could earn no rebuke; for what woman has ever yet resented being set apart from the herd? A tangible pinnacle may have its disadvantages, but an intangible one is always veiled in irresistible glamour.

When Grote parted from her at her own hall-door Jessamy could not know that he sped back to Tudor Lodge as fast as the traffic regulations would allow, impatient to hear from Mrs. Wyatt's lips whatever little secrets the girl might have revealed during the afternoon's interview.

Claire had no scruples about telling him, but an unwilling admiration for Amber pricked her to say at the close of her recital:

"Whatever Yule Amber may be, at least he has acted like a gentleman."

"And a fool, you must admit also, Clair-de-lune," exclaimed Grote in high good-humour.

"At least a chivalrous one," murmured Claire: but it is to be doubted that Grote heard her, so wrapt was he in the dreams of the future which his mind was so busily weaving.

IV

Jessamy let herself into the house.

The hall was in economical darkness. She switched on the light. There was no sound of life or movement anywhere save the sudden crash of a plate down in the basement, which portended one of Emma's frequent breakages.

She opened the drawing-room door and went in. The room had the stiff, almost menacing aspect of a room which has not been used. The fire had been lit, but was now almost out. The place looked bare after the drawing-room at Tudor Lodge with its warmth, scent and softness, and the grace of its masses of flowers.

Jessamy turned away with a flat, chilly sensation. Before she reached the door there was a scurry of feet on the stairs and Yule came quickly into the room.

"Sorry I wasn't down to greet you," he said with a welcoming smile. "There's nothing so damping to the spirits as coming back to a dark, apparently uninhabited house."

"No," Jessamy agreed with a little shiver.

"You're cold," said Yule, taking her hands quickly in his. "Yes, these are like stones."

He began to rub them gently. Jessamy drew them away.

"It's only my hands. The rest of me is quite warm, Yule."

Yule moved away. "The fire is nearly out. I'm so sorry. I've been having tea in the studio with Nanetty and forgot all about it."

"It's Emma's business, not yours."

"Oh, never mind Emma. She's in love, I think, and would forget her own head if it weren't on her shoulders! I'll get some sticks and the bellows and I'll have a topping fire by the time you've changed."

"I wish you wouldn't bother, Yule."

"It's no bother," Yule returned cheerfully. "Haven't you yet realized how much I like doing things for you?"

"Not things like that, though."

"Yes, especially things like that."

Jessamy knew that she had been ungracious as she went slowly up the stairs to her own room, but she was conscious of the most paradoxical sense of grievance against Yule.

First for his not having been downstairs to greet her when she came in, then for having met her so cheerily, with no sign of apprehension about her afternoon, and finally for his action about the fire. She did not want him to see to it himself. She knew that Lucas Grote would have had the whole domestic staff rushing to attend to his wants before he would have fetched a stick or blown a bellows, even for her. That was certainly the correct masculine attitude which, at the moment, she perversely preferred to Yule's penurious handiness.

Pricked by the same queer unreasonable resentment she put on her prettiest gown — a pale pink Liberty tea-frock — and went downstairs again to find Yule on his knees blowing the fire to a blaze.

"I do wish you had let Emma do that," she said petulantly, as she pulled the couch forward and dropped into her special corner.

Yule sat back on his heels and looked at her with a laugh. The firelight showed up the hollows in his cheeks and temples, and the first touch of frost on his hair.

"Does it upset your idea of what's fitting to see me being useful?" he asked. "You've married into the

bourgeoisie, my dear, and you must get accustomed to bourgeois ways."

"But those aren't bourgeois ways," protested Jessamy, smiling in spite of herself. "A bourgeois husband would be far too respectable to make himself as useful as you do, Yule."

"A step lower, then," sighed Yule whimsically. "Must we say Bohemian?"

"I'm afraid we must," Jessamy laughed, once more on good terms with herself and the world.

Yule had a surprisingly sweet temper, she reflected. There was no use in being annoyed with him. He either didn't or wouldn't see it. Besides, there was nothing to be annoyed about, really. Perhaps the oiled wheels and opulence of Tudor Lodge were a little demoralizing: the petting and spoiling of Claire and Lucas a trifle enervating after the bracing independence of Caroline Place.

Yule put away the hammered brass bellows which they had picked up together in a little by-street off King's Road.

"Tell me all your adventures of the afternoon," he said. "I'm anxious to know how you got on."

"Come and be comfortable first."

Yule shot a quick glance at her, then hitched himself along the floor until his shoulder touched her knee. He leaned back his head on the edge of the couch and looked up at her.

"You don't mind?"

"Of course not," said Jessamy hastily. Then, with an unexpected graciousness, she put out her hand and drew his head against her knee. "Is that more comfy?" she asked, smiling down at him, her pulses quite unquickened by the contact.

Yule drew a breath that was almost a gasp.

"Also a sweete Hell it is,
And a sorrowfull Paradis,"

he murmured.

Jessamy, her hand light as a butterfly upon his hair, bent to listen.

"What did you say, Yule?"

"I was only quoting Chaucer," he answered. "A pernicious habit, quotation."

"Oh, no," answered Jessamy politely.

Yule sat there, rigid for a moment, his cheek against the smoothness of Jessamy's silken gown, his whole being on fire with that butterfly touch on his hair and the consciousness of her dear unattainable nearness. He closed his eyes to savour the full poignance of his "sweete Hell and Sorrowfull Paradis," and touched for an instant a bitter-sweet ecstasy.

How long the silence lasted only Jessamy knew; and her thoughts were busy elsewhere, when a rather strained voice broke in upon them.

"Shocking lapse of manners on the part of a Bohemian! I really do want to hear all about your afternoon, Jessamy."

V

"You ought to marry, Lucas," said Julius Brand, looking keenly at his nephew. "You've philandered long enough. It's time you settled down."

Brand was a stout man of strongly-marked features and a striking pallor, which made him look older than his sixty-seven years. He would probably look no older when he was eighty, Grote thought, as he studied him from the other side of the big knee-hole desk which blocked up most of the little inner office at the Leyden Galleries.

"Right as usual, Uncle Julius," he agreed, stroking his little moustache: a trick which went incongruously with its modern brevity.

"What about the Wyatt widow? She's a fine woman and very well off, I hear. Beside, you once had passages, hadn't you?"

"Cut laurels," returned Grote briefly.

Brand smiled: then left the subject for a moment.

"I have a crow to pluck with you, Lucas," he said. "Why did you give the show away to Miss Cotes the other day? She really didn't know about the fakes, and she refuses now to do any more work for me. She came here in a fury two days ago. I had to threaten her with the law ——"

"The law, my dear uncle?" Grote's eyebrows went up, and his lips gave the amused twitch that did duty with him for a smile. "Wasn't that, to say the least of it, a little risky on your part?"

Julius Brand's answering grin showed yellowish teeth.

"I flatter myself that I know more than the A B C of the art of bluff."

"But suppose she had threatened to expose your frauds?"

"Just so." Brand nodded. "These over-scrupulous people are seldom clever, Lucas. If she had done that I shouldn't have had a leg to stand on. She could have made matters devilish unpleasant for me if she had only had the wit to see it."

Grote laughed. "Lucky for you she hadn't. I never meant to give you away, Uncle Julius. I thought from the lady's demeanour that she knew all about it. In any case, it was only a slip of the tongue. I'm awfully sorry about it." He had no intention of bringing Jessamy into the matter.

"No use crying over spilt milk. . . . But she had a touch, that woman. Sometimes, after my process, I could scarcely tell copy from original myself. She was one of my best workers. It's a confounded nuisance and a big loss to me that she's cried off. . . . I wonder how I could put the screw on to make her come back." Brand sighed thoughtfully and rested his head on his hand. "She has no money but what she earns, I know. She told me so herself."

There was a rap at the door. Julius Brand, straightening himself to say "Come in," assumed the business manner which he had dropped like a discarded cloak while talking to his nephew.

An elderly assistant entered.

"Yes, Samson, what is it?"

"A gentleman wishes to see you, sir. On business, he said. He asked me to give you this card." Samson held out a visiting-card.

Brand took it and read: "Mr. Yule Amber! Odd name. Now, who the deuce is Mr. Yule Amber? Does he look like a customer, Samson?"

"No, sir."

"He isn't a customer," Grote cut in. "He's a cousin of that Miss Cotes of whom we were speaking just now."

"The deuce he is!" said Brand. "Tell him I will be with him in a minute, Samson." When the man had closed the door behind him, he turned to Grote. "What the devil does this mean, Lucas? Do you know the fellow?"

"I've met him. I think he's harmless, uncle. Another of those fools of whom, according to the wise man, the world is mainly composed."

"Hm!" Brand turned over the situation in his mind. "What is he after, I wonder?"

"Don't bring him in here. I don't want to be mixed up in this business," said Grote quickly.

"It appears that you've got yourself mixed up in it already," returned Brand dryly. "Well, I'd better see the fellow, and find out what he's up to."

He left the inner office and went down through the series of rather dark rooms filled with old books, old china, old furniture, old armour — a heterogeneous collection of antiquities, old and new, that comprised the stock-in-trade of the Leyden Galleries.

Yule Amber awaited him in the outer room in full view of Samson. Brand advanced and bowed courteously.

"You wished to see me, Mr. Amber?"

"Yes," answered Yule, to whom the inspiration of his visit had come during a sleepless night. "Can I speak to you in private for a moment?"

"Certainly." Brand led the way to one of the inner rooms and drew forward two Jacobean chairs in a recess formed by a Queen Anne sideboard and a mahogany book-case. "Will you be seated, Mr. Amber?"

He placed Yule's chair where the thin light fell on his face.

"If you will kindly tell me in what way I can serve you?" he hinted, politely.

The man was not as Yule pictured him. Brand's pallor and deep-set eyes suggested a state of health which roused his ready sympathy, despite his righteous anger on Nanetty's behalf: his courteous manner was disarming.

"You can serve me by cancelling the contract which you made with my cousin, Miss Cotes," answered Yule, going straight to the point.

Brand coughed. "Dear me, Mr. Amber, this is a very surprising suggestion. Why should I do such a thing? Miss Cotes was one of my most successful artists, and I consider that she has left me most shamefully in the lurch."

Yule hardened. "I shouldn't be in such a hurry to call another person's conduct shameful, Mr. Brand, if I were you.

"What would be thought of you if I were to expose the frauds which you've practised for years upon an unsuspecting public?"

Brand's cavernous eyes blinked. . . . The young man was not quite such a fool as Lucas had made out. He had his finger on the screw, and could twist it as tightly as he chose. If he wished to bleed him. . . . But not for nothing had Julius Brand boasted his mastery of the art of bluff.

"Am I to take it that this is blackmail?" he asked gently.

Yule reddened. "Good God, no!"

"What then?"

"Merely an hypothesis."

"In plain English ——" suggested Brand, pausing.

"In plain English, then," agreed Yule. "I mean that with my cousin's innocent aid you have been perpetrating a fraud upon the public for years. It would be greatly to your discredit and disadvantage if this were exposed ——"

"To your cousin's discredit also, Mr. Amber."

"It is you who, as principal in the fraudulent transaction, would get all the blame."

"All the kicks, in fact," began Brand, smiling.

"As you have undoubtedly got all the ha-pence," interrupted Yule quickly. "You can't deny that your reputation would be ruined if the fraud were exposed. You have a reputation, I presume?"

"Practically world-wide," murmured Brand.

"Well, then . . .?"

"Am I to take it that you propose to expose me? I warn you that it would be a long and costly business."

"A good deal of damage could be done to your reputation without going to law. You daren't prosecute me for libel supposing that I ——"

"I decline to suppose that you are going to do anything so foolish. I am not an unreasonable man, Mr. Amber. The creaking of the law-machine is to me a distasteful sound. Will you tell me in a few words what it is exactly that you want?"

"I want you to tear up my cousin's contract, and leave her free to sell her work elsewhere if she can. I want you to promise not to put any obstacles in the way of her doing so."

"In return for which ——?" Brand's eyes questioned him shrewdly.

"In return for which I promise not to expose your abominable frauds."

"Do you think that is a strictly honourable course of conduct, Mr. Amber?" asked Brand, with an air of amusement which suddenly infuriated Yule.

"No, confound you, I don't! But it's a bargain on my cousin's behalf. I'm not breaking a lance for the general public. If they're foolish enough to be gulled by you, let them. I don't care if I am compounding a felony, or whatever you call it. All I care about is that Nan —— my cousin should be free to do the only work she likes doing, and that you should promise not to put a spoke in her wheel."

"Would you take my word, then?"

"Yes, of course," answered Yule. "You'd have to take mine. It's better not to put these things on paper, isn't it?"

"Much better."

"I know that there are tricks of the trade in almost every business," Yule went on, rather uncomfortably. "And that men who are strictly honourable in other respects think nothing of them."

"That's why you are willing to take my word, then, in spite of what you call — let me see — yes, my abominable frauds?"

Yule's thin face reddened again. "Yes."

Brand rose. "I will fetch the contract, it is in my safe. You can take it to your cousin and let her destroy it herself."

Yule's eyes shone. "Thanks awfully," he said with the smile that irradiated his plainness.

Brand turned without a word and went back through the crowded rooms to his office. He was a heavy man and moved heavily: but his thoughts were alert enough as he entered the inner chamber, where his nephew was smoking one of the cigars he kept for specially favoured clients.

"Well, Uncle Julius?" said Grote, as the old man entered and crossed the room to his safe.

"Well, Lucas?" Brand opened his safe and took out a bundle of papers, which he began to examine. "That's a queer chap, that Amber. . . . A bit of a fool certainly, but if there were no fools in the world what would we clever fellows do? . . . Eh, Lucas?"

Grote laughed uncertainly. He did not quite understand his uncle's tone.

"Who is that fellow, Amber? What do you know about him?" Brand selected a paper from the bundle, snapped on its elastic band again and put it back into the safe.

"Merely that he's husband of the woman I'm going to marry," Grote answered with an assumed lightness.

Old Brand turned round from the safe with a flash from his cavernous eyes.

"No scandal, Lucas," he warned.

"Oh, there'll be no scandal, uncle, I assure you. Amber is the sort of idiot who'll be willing to let himself be divorced once he knows that she wishes it."

Brand checked speech, looked at Grote, and said very slowly:

"I wonder, nephew . . . I wonder!"

Then he turned on his heel and made his way out through the flotsam and jetsam of the centuries to where Yule Amber awaited him.

Amber rose as the other approached. Brand held out a paper.

"Here is Miss Cote's contract. I give you my word, Mr. Amber, that I shan't do anything to prevent her from selling her work how and where she likes, on condition that you and she hold your tongues about this little — what you very properly call trick of the trade. . . . Will that do?"

"Perfectly," Yule answered, putting the paper, folded as it was, into his breast-pocket. "I don't know about

you, Mr. Brand, but I do know that my cousin would be deadly ashamed to let any one know that she was party to such a fraud."

"Hmm," grunted Julius Brand. "You haven't looked at that paper, Mr. Amber. Never take anything for granted in this tricky old world."

"Oh, the world isn't tricky," began Yule.

"Only the people in it," continued Brand. "Well, it is the Cotes contract, as it happens, so you're safe this time."

"I never for an instant imagined that it was anything else," said Yule. "Good-evening, Mr. Brand. Thank you for meeting me half-way."

"Good-evening, Mr. Amber." Brand accompanied him to the door of the Galleries. "If ever you want to buy any antiques I promise you that you shall have the genuine article if you deal here."

"Thanks," smiled Yule, buttoning up his coat over the precious contract. "I'm afraid there is no likelihood of my ever being rich enough to indulge in such luxuries!"

Brand watched the thin, rather shabby figure until it turned the corner of the street. Then he went slowly back to his office.

"I'd rather like to know the real story behind that queer triangle," he mused. "I wonder if Lucas would tell me if I put on the screw a bit."

VI

Yule walked on air as he went back to Caroline Place. His spirit outsoared the lumbering 'bus, as he saw himself giving Nanetty the pleasantest surprise of her life. He had often given her surprises, but they had not always been pleasant ones. Even in this moment of exaltation he realized that.

Dear old Nanetty . . . she need not worry about

silly pet dogs and birds now! Jessamy, too, would be pleased . . . Jessamy. . . .

She seemed to have slipped away again from him since their moment of rapport the other night. How dear she had been then, how unutterably sweet and approachable! If only . . .

The 'bus stopped with a jerk. It was only a few hundred yards along the Embankment to Caroline Place. Yule hurried his steps. In an instant the cream walls of the three houses would come in sight. He always loved this first moment of seeing them. He rounded the edge of the long curve and became aware of the little oasis of houses behind the plane-trees.

A smart motor car, shining in violet enamel and silver, was just leaving the door and gliding away down the Embankment in the opposite direction.

Who was in it, he wondered idly. Some of Jessamy's smart friends come to call? Perhaps Mrs. Wyatt. . . . But if it were Mrs. Wyatt surely she would have stayed. She would have kept the car, not sent it away . . . but perhaps not. Involuntarily his pace slackened. The presence of strangers would inevitably take the first bloom off his little surprise. They could never really amalgamate, he and Nanetty, with these smart, opulent people: they moved in such totally different worlds.

"But then," he told himself, "they're human beings just like ourselves. It's only the veneer that's different. They're more highly polished than we are, that's all. They're just the same underneath once you crack the enamel."

But that was what he knew was so difficult of attainment. These smart people would go to any lengths of polished pretence rather than have their precious enamel cracked. He smiled at his absurd simile. By this time he had reached Caroline Place. He ran up the steps and let himself in. He stood listening in the hall for a moment. The drawing-room door was ajar. No murmur

of voices came through it. He pushed the door open and entered.

It was empty, but the fragrance of Jessamy's presence still lingered, as if she had only just left it. A novel lay face downwards on the couch. Next it was her work-basket of gaily-coloured straws, with a half-embroidered camisole sticking out of it. In one pale yellow cushion was a dent as if her young shoulder had lately been pressed against it.

Suddenly Yule was aware of a definite as well as an intangible perfume. He lifted his head to see masses of flowers everywhere: golden and orange tulips, bowls of lilies-of-the-valley fragile amid their own pale-green leaves, branches of white and purple lilac almost overpowering in their sweetness.

He went to the windows and opened them wider, letting the keen spring air blow the warm stuffiness out of the room.

"Jessamy must have gone out," he thought disappointedly. "I wonder if Nanetty is in."

Acting on the thought he ran upstairs two steps at a time and knocked sharply at the studio door. "Are you there, Nanetty?"

"Come in," answered Nanetty's voice, to his swift relief.

Idle for a wonder, Nanetty lay in a deck-chair by the open window, her eyes seeking the cloud-dappled blue sky above the chimney-pots. A faint scent of lilac came up from the little back-garden. She turned her head at Yule's entrance.

"Hallo, old boy, back from your mysterious errand?" she said in a tone which Yule's accustomed ear told him was heightened to a forced cheerfulness.

"Yes," he answered. "And the errand is no longer a mystery."

Nanetty heard a crackle of paper behind her. Then a folded document was dropped into her lap.

"I went out to get a little present for you," said Yule in as ordinary a tone as he could achieve. "Hope you'll like it."

"Yule, you shouldn't," protested Nanetty. "You know I don't want you to give me presents."

"Open this one, anyhow, and see what you think of it."

Yule leaned over the back of the chair, lifted the paper and put it into her hands. Slowly Nanetty unfolded it, looked at it, dropped it in her lap with a startled cry.

"Yule! Where did you get this?"

"From your old Brand."

"How? Why? What am I to do with it?"

"I would suggest burning it."

"Oh, Yule! Is it true? Is this the real contract? Am I free?" cried Nanetty excitedly.

"It looks like it," answered Yule, trying to conceal his own delight under a dry demeanour.

Nanetty jumped up and put her hands on his shoulders.

"Yule, you darling! How am I to thank you?"

"Don't try," said Yule, taking the work-worn hands in his and holding them tightly. "Nanetty, my dear, don't I owe you everything in the world, almost? Haven't you always been goodness itself to me, patience, sympathy? What is this little thing compared to what I should like to do for you?"

"It isn't a little thing," said Nanetty, gruff in order to hide her emotion. "It's a big thing . . . the biggest thing . . . my independence ——" Her voice broke. She pulled her hands from Yule and put her knuckles into her eyes, as a child might. "Yule, dear, we, or rather I seem to have been very emotional of late! Is there any nice ordinary little thing we could do to reduce the temperature to normal again?"

"Let's burn the contract," Yule suggested. "But first read it through carefully ——"

"Oh, it's all right," said Nanetty joyously. "That's my own old spider-scrawl signature sure enough and Julius Brand's too. We'll burn it in this tin basin that I wash my brushes in, and when it's consumed and its ashes thrown out to the house-tops you'll tell me how you worked the miracle."

"It wasn't a miracle, Nanetty. Your old friend, who doesn't appear to have a very exalted opinion of mankind, seemed inclined to suggest that it was blackmail."

"What nonsense! How could you possibly blackmail him?"

Nanetty had opened the paper to its widest extent and laid it in the tin basin. "The matches are on the mantelpiece."

"We can't use an ordinary match. We must have one of my wax vestas. This is a ceremony, remember." Yule lit one and applied it to an edge of the contract. "Here, you must light the other end. . . . Looking at the matter in cold blood, Nanetty, I'm afraid that it did seem rather like blackmail. I threatened to expose Brand's fraud if he didn't give up the contract."

"But to expose him would have meant exposing me," gasped Nanetty, as the paper caught and smouldered.

"Do you think I didn't know that? But you had done no wrong, old thing, and he had. That was where he felt the turn of the screw. If it had been necessary to show him up you'd have come out with clean hands all right. Still, I suppose it was what you might call bluff on my part," Yule went on innocently. "For of course we couldn't have afforded to have gone to law, even if we had a legal case, which I doubt. I could have given his methods a good deal of unpleasant publicity if I had chosen, though, and I suppose he knew that. However, he didn't seem such a bad old chap, Nanetty. His manners were courteous and ——"

"Oh, he was always suave enough, though one was conscious of a snarl beneath that smile. His conscience

must have been bad to make him give up the contract so easily."

"Or my methods very persuasive. Do you think I'm cut out for a blackmailer, old thing? Shall I take it up instead of drawing? I might find it more lucrative."

"I can't see you a successful blackmailer, Yule." Nanetty smiled at him very tenderly.

Suddenly the paper sprang into flame. In a moment all that was left of the contract was a thin black film on which the two signatures stood out whitely: Julius Brand: Annette Cotes: . . . ghost names that would no longer haunt either signatory.

Yule took the tin basin and jerked the ashes out of the window. They fluttered earthwards like black butterflies until they came to rest among the lilac-bushes.

"That's over and done with, thank God," he said. "Good-bye, parrakeets! Good-bye, pet dogs! Another than Nanetty shall feed and lead you!"

"Thank God, indeed! — and you too, old boy," breathed Nanetty behind him.

Yule swung round. "And now for another studio tea-party! I presume that Jessamy is out, as I couldn't find her anywhere downstairs."

"Oh, Yule, I forgot." Nanetty looked concerned. "Mrs. Wyatt came here soon after you had gone, and carried Jessamy off to tea just before you came in. Jessamy ran up before she went to say that I was to tell you to follow her to Tudor Lodge the minute you got back."

"It's too late now. I'd much rather have tea with you, old thing."

"Nonsense. It's quite early yet. Put on your best suit and take a taxi, if necessary."

"My best suit? Shall I have time to change?"

"Plenty. What does it matter if you're a little late for tea? Stay for dinner, too, if Mrs. Wyatt asks you. Don't let them have it all their own way with Jessamy."

"You prejudiced old ——"

"I'm not prejudiced. I've seen them both now, and they fulfil my worst expectations."

"Nanetty! . . . Not Mrs. Wyatt!"

"Yes, Mrs. Wyatt, too. Insincerity to the tips of her pink polished fingers!"

"Horrible example of the tyranny of the preconceived idea!" groaned Yule.

"Do go, you tiresome creature!" Nanetty almost pushed him out of the room, and then prepared her solitary tea with a lighter heart than had been hers since the shadow of Lucas Grote first fell on Caroline Place.

VII

A STRANGE period followed in the lives of both Yule and Jessamy Amber: a period of further restraints and difficult decisions for the man: of feverish excitements and incessant gaieties for the girl.

Cleverly, subtly, Claire Wyatt worked for Grote and wove her webs about Jessamy, entangling her days, absorbing her interests, gradually identifying all her preoccupations with theirs.

There was no perceptible exclusion of Amber. In fact, at first Mrs. Wyatt made rather a fuss over him. She professed an intense admiration for him, praising him in season and out of season to Jessamy, but always with the faint praise that damns.

"Dear Yule is so naïve," Mrs. Wyatt would declare with her most charming smile. "He makes me feel horribly sophisticated."

And another time:

"Living with Yule must be rather like living with a bracing March wind. He ruffles up all one's little imperfections until they are painfully visible."

Or —

"Don't you enjoy coming down from your mountain-top, Jessamy, and being of the earth earthy once more?

Dear Yule lives in a rarefied atmosphere that is rather unsuitable for our poor human lungs."

Never a thistle-down shaft that had not its own faintly malicious barb.

At first Jessamy turned each dart aside with a smile, plucking the tiny pricking thing out, as it were, and casting it from her: but after a while they stuck and hung there rankling.

She was not consciously disloyal to Yule, but all the peace of her earlier days at Caroline Place was gone. Her position suddenly seemed strangely anomalous. She was married and yet not married. She had an unacknowledged — no, a very definitely acknowledged lover, and yet she was perfectly pure and good. Even her husband did not object to his presence in her daily life.

Grote, in the background, was a distinctly glamorous figure. She had no idea how slowly, how insidiously he was edging his way into the foreground of her days.

Yule had said that he worshipped her, and yet he kept her more or less at bay. She had no idea how her careless little familiarities tortured him. He exacted nothing, and yet he expected a good deal. Claire was quite right: he *did* live in a rarefied atmosphere.

Lucas, on the other hand, asked nothing but to be allowed to sun himself in the light of her presence. He "compassed her about with sweet observances": sent her sheaves of flowers, kept her supplied with the choicest sweets, the newest books. He always had stalls for the last new play, a table at the smartest restaurant. Unobtrusively he filled her days with little pleasures and amusements, so that the hours without him came to seem strangely flat and empty. And all *he* expected in return was just the innocent favour of her company.

The Spring restlessness stirred Jessamy's blood, troubling her vaguely. Her awakening womanhood was already turning in its sleep. She was conscious of a new sense of quickened perceptions, of opening vistas. A

sudden desire seized her to keep life at bay no longer, as she had been doing all these months. It was the natural reaction of youth after what she had been through, but she did not realize this. She only knew that she wanted the blossoms of happiness. What matter if the roses had thorns or if the wind took some of their petals? She must live . . . live, live.

Claire Wyatt never forgot her rôle. So imperceptibly did it come about that Jessamy hardly noticed when Yule first began to be dropped out of the once-desired *partie carrée.*

Claire would say deprecatingly:

"I could only get four stalls for Tuesday night, Jessamy dearest, and I've already asked Mr. Ronaldson. Dear Yule won't mind if I don't include him this time?"

"Of course not," Jessamy would answer promptly. "He'll quite understand."

"I knew he would. He's such a dear. And he really seems to be rather out of it sometimes at our little parties, doesn't he?"

Another time it would be Grote who would deliberately exclude Amber from his invitation; or Claire, when given an opera-box, would explain worriedly:

"The Reggie Burnetts' cousin is staying with them — the celebrated explorer, you know. They asked if they might bring him and I couldn't refuse — but six is the absolute limit for that box. Dear Yule won't mind ——"

"Of course not," Jessamy would say again, but without quite so much conviction.

Oddly enough, she could not feel comfortable about it until she had asked Yule himself: but when he assured her that he quite understood, she made up her mind to enjoy herself whole-heartedly without him.

"Mrs. Wyatt is always most charming," Yule said. "But between ourselves, Jessamy, I never feel as if I could breathe properly at Tudor Lodge."

"That's what Claire says. She says that you live in a more rarefied atmosphere than ——"

"What utter tosh!" exclaimed Yule. "I meant something absolutely material. The rooms there are always too warm, too scented for my taste. That's all. . . . Do you really enjoy it, Jessamy?" he continued with a hint of pleading. "Aren't you glad sometimes to come back to the bareness and freshness of this little house?"

"Of course," answered Jessamy loyally. "Don't people say that contrast is the spice of life? Between this and Tudor Lodge I feel as if I were living in two different worlds."

"So you are. Two totally different worlds. Which are you going to choose, I wonder?"

Jessamy looked startled. "What on earth do you mean, Yule? Why can't I have both?"

"You can have both for the present," Yule answered, quietly, "but you'll have to choose between them ultimately, you know. Not now. I want you to have a fair chance of judging. I'll tell you more later on. You needn't worry about it tonight."

Jessamy looked perturbed. His words brought a hint of stark reality into her play-time.

"I don't understand you in the least, Yule."

"Yet what I said was both simple and obvious. . . . Run along and enjoy yourself, my dear."

"Sure you won't be lonely or moping?" she said childishly, putting his ultimatum behind her.

Yule smiled. "I shall certainly be lonely, but I've no intention of moping," he returned.

When she had gone, the house, as always, seemed strangely empty: prophetic of what life without her would become.

Amber was conscious of a sort of fatalistic calm. Though Nanetty accused him of drifting, he was all the while anchored to a decision: a decision to which he had

come shortly after the first resumption of relations with Tudor Lodge.

He knew that the present state of affairs could not continue indefinitely. Jessamy had married him on a mad impulse, spurred to such a risk by what she now discovered had been a mistake. He had married her because he worshipped and adored her, and because he would have willingly laid down his life for her had circumstances demanded it. The sacrifice of his future happiness was not too great a price to pay for the securing of hers.

He had quite made up his mind.

Jessamy was to have a perfectly free hand. He would put no obstacles in the way of her experiencing anew all the savours of her former life: she must taste them and test them to the full. She knew what life with him had been. He would try to show her what it might become. He would talk straight to her when the opportunity came: would lay bare his inmost soul before her, as he had never done hitherto, then he would tell her that she must make her choice.

He assumed that Grote loved Jessamy as honourably as he did. He gave him credit for his own restraints, his own scruples. If Jessamy still loved her former lover and wanted him she must have him. There were ways and means by which she could be set free, Yule imagined: sordid ways, distasteful means. Still, he was willing to make even that last sacrifice for her, if she so desired it. That she should be happy, that she should not have to pay a life-long price for her mad folly, was his one, most fervent wish. It was due to her to offer her her freedom now that the reason for her marriage with him no longer existed.

Meanwhile Jessamy danced, and laughed, and flitted gaily through the somewhat hectic pleasures of her new-old existence: conscious the while that she had neither absolutely shed the new or re-assimilated the old: con-

scious also of an unrest, a sense of insecurity which had been induced by Yule's hint of an ultimate decision. The thought of it hung over her like a menace, even while she feverishly grasped at what life brought her with eager, out-stretched hands.

"Don't you think you've given her rope enough?" Nanetty once asked dryly.

"No, not yet," Yule answered.

Nanetty could not know that he felt himself in the position of a man who is condemned to death, but who has himself to fix the hour for his own execution; nor that the length of Jessamy's rope might well be the length of the noose about his own happiness.

VIII

As so often happens, Fate at length forced Amber's hand.

It was on one of Jessamy's now rare evenings at home, and she was alone in the drawing-room after what every one but herself called supper.

Suddenly she drew the golden curtains together to shut out the troubling blue dusk and the swift inexorable motion of the river, on whose darkly burnished flood a barge or two stood out in black silhouette. Then, returning to the fire, for the evenings were still cold, she threw on some pine-logs that spurted and crackled, giving to the dusk of the room a sudden friendly intimacy. She curled herself up on the couch and watched the leaping orange and crocus-blue flames with brooding eyes.

Yule, entering, switched on the light. Jessamy looked up quickly.

"Don't do that, please. I like it better as it is."

"Sorry," said Yule, switching it off again. "It is certainly jollier like this. Mind if I smoke?"

He felt that he could not sit near her unoccupied in

this half-light of flickering flames and dancing shadows. Once again his pipe was to be his friend.

"You know I don't. You might hand me my cigarettes. They're on the mantelpiece."

"Lazy child!"

He handed her her cigarette-case and held a lighted match for her use. Its flare revealed what the fire-flicker had hinted, that Jessamy's eyes had shadows beneath them.

"Yule," she said suddenly. "Claire wants me to go and stay with her for a few days at Tudor Lodge."

"When?" asked Yule after an instant's quick-drawn breath. "And why? Is it for any special function?"

"Whenever I like. No, nothing special. I daresay she will get up something while I'm there, but she really wants me to collect my belongings and bring them here."

"Oh," said Yule.

The simple explanation was like the shock of a sudden immersion. The moment was on him unawares: that moment on which his and her future entirely depended. He longed for the tongue of a Chrysostom, but felt cold, speechless, filled with a sudden deadly foreboding.

"You don't mind, do you?" Jessamy went on.

It was the inevitable formula to which the inevitable answer — "Of course not" — was duly expected. But it did not come this time.

Yule said instead rather huskily: "Do you remember my saying to you some time ago that you must choose between — let us say — Tudor Lodge and Caroline Place?"

Jessamy, startled, sat straight up in her corner and stared at Yule.

"Of course I remember — and I also remember how absurd I thought it."

"It's not absurd, Jessamy. It's a big vital decision that must affect our whole future."

"I never heard such nonsense," cried Jessamy indig-

nantly. "First of all you were constantly bothering me to make friends with Claire. Now when I've done so — with your entire approval, don't forget — you suddenly hold a pistol at my head and say I must choose between Tudor Lodge and Caroline Place! I never heard anything so ridiculous in my life."

"Put that way, it does sound rather odd, I'll admit."

"What other way is there of putting it?"

"More than one, probably," Yule answered. "If you'll only have patience with me I'll try to explain what I mean."

"It seems to me to need a good deal of explanation."

"It does, Jessamy. I'll try to be as brief as possible. I don't want heroics any more than you do."

"I'm glad to hear that," exclaimed Jessamy, pulling up a cushion behind her and settling herself back into her corner with a decidedly defiant air.

"I'll have to probe below the surface, though," he warned her. "We've got to come down to bedrock tonight. We've got to face bare facts and find out what — what things mean to us both."

"Oh, dear!" sighed Jessamy distastefully. "Just when everything had got so nice and ordinary."

"But that's just what it hasn't done. Everything is devilish nasty and most extraordinary. For me, anyhow."

"For you?" queried Jessamy in astonishment.

"Yes, for me," Yule repeated doggedly. "I don't want to trouble you too much with my own personal feelings, but almost ever since I married you, especially for these last few months, my life has been an absolute hell."

"I — I don't understand you."

"No, how could you, poor child? . . . Unsatisfied longing, perpetual desire, the torments of Tantalus ——" He stopped abruptly; then went on in a quieter tone: "You know why you married me, Jessamy?"

Jessamy nodded.

"I was to be a barrier between you and those whom you thought had deceived you. I was to be the means of putting you out of their reach for ever — a door, as it were, shut between you and them."

"Yes."

"Well, the need for that barrier apparently no longer exists. . . . You were quite frank with me about it. You made no pretence of caring either then or now. . . . With the disappearance of that barrier disappears also the reason for our marriage. . . . Do you follow me?"

"Quite."

"Before you met me you were engaged to Grote. . . . Did you love him as he loved you?"

"Yes," answered Jessamy very low.

"Does he love you still?"

"Yes, Yule."

"Do you love him?"

Jessamy twisted her fingers together. "You have no right to ask me that."

"My dear, I am the one person in the world who *has* the right to ask you that," said Yule gravely. His face took on a sudden greyish pallor. He felt that she had answered him already. "I don't want to hurt you unnecessarily, but we must get this thing clear between us. I have no delusions as to your feelings for me. I am not blaming you. . . . We agreed on what our relations were to be before we were married. I've kept to my part of the bargain, haven't I?"

"You certainly have," Jessamy murmured.

"I used to hope . . . I even hope still," said Yule, lifting his head with a queer little smile, "that you might some day grow to care for me as I care for you. For I do care for you, Jessamy. I worship you. I adore you. I crave for you as a man craves for the one and only woman. I want you with every fibre of my being,

body and soul. . . . I have the legal right to take you, but what does the body mean unless the heart goes with it? Some men don't feel like that, I know, but I do. You're safe from that, as far as I'm concerned . . . for the time being."

Jessamy, really startled now, saw the drops glistening on his forehead in the firelight. She kept on twisting her hands together, but said nothing. She did not know what to say to this strange, new, uncomfortable Yule.

Yule went on in a low strained voice.

"I'm nearly at breaking-point now. . . . I can't stand very much more. . . . It must be one thing or the other between us. . . . I spoke of Tantalus. Do you know what his torture was?"

"No."

"Because he stole the nectar and ambrosia from the table of the gods he was punished in hell with an insatiable thirst and placed up to his chin in the middle of a pool of water, which flowed away whenever he attempted to drink it. Above his head was a bough laden with delicious fruit which a gust of wind blew out of his reach every time he tried to seize it. . . . The comparison is an apt one — though I haven't even attempted to steal any nectar and ambrosia."

"Oh!"

"I was glad at first when you got into touch with your old life again. I knew that it was rather dull for you here at times, and I thought it good that you should have some interests other than ours at Caroline Place. But now the old life seems to have utterly absorbed you — in the shape of Grote and Mrs. Wyatt. You — you — sleep here, but that's all. Even when you are here your thoughts are elsewhere. I've realized that for some time."

Jessamy showed a spurt of spirit.

"If you disapproved why didn't you say all this sooner?"

"I wanted to give you a fair chance," answered Yule gently. "I wanted you to test both ways of living for yourself before you made your choice. At first I didn't think there would need to be a choice. Now I know that it's inevitable."

"But why, Yule, why? I can't see why we shouldn't go on as we're going ——"

"Do you think that it's a wise or even a safe way?" countered Yule.

Jessamy was mute. She fixed her gaze on the fire. . . . Yule was being very queer, very difficult, *very* disturbing.

"You know it's not," said Yule, and his voice held a sternness which Jessamy had never heard in it before. "Though our marriage is merely a nominal one you bear my name and hold my honour in your hands. The present — triangular — situation is fair to none of us."

He stopped abruptly. Jessamy turned her head to look at him.

"How do you propose to end it, then?" she asked.

"If you love Grote ——" Yule began hoarsely.

Jessamy was grateful to the friendly dusk that hid her red confusion at the implication.

"If you love Grote," said Yule again. "I — I am prepared to take whatever steps are necessary to set you free to marry him."

"Oh!" said Jessamy in a cold little voice. "You seem very anxious to get rid of me."

The taunt flicked Yule to a sudden loss of temper.

"My God, this is too much!" he cried. "You are not a child, Jessamy. You're a woman, and you ought to show some of a woman's qualities and not the flippancy of a flapper in a matter of vital importance like this. I don't want to get rid of you and well you know it. It would be like tearing the very heart out of my body to let you go. I want to chain you to me, to seal you mine so closely that you could never escape, no

matter how you tried. . . . It's just because I love you so desperately, you maddening, tormenting, adorable creature, that I want you to be happy. I want your happiness more than my own. Don't you know that? . . . Haven't you always known it? . . . Didn't I tell you so even before we were married?"

"I — suppose so," faltered Jessamy, now a little frightened of this strange, white-faced, passionate Yule. "I — didn't mean to be flippant, Yule. I — I'm sorry."

Suddenly she turned and, hiding her face against the cushion, began to cry quietly.

"Don't do that," said Yule harshly. "I can't stand it. Let me finish what I have to say while I have still some remnants of self-control left."

Jessamy, trembling, felt for her handkerchief and dried her eyes with a gulp or two.

"Go on. I'm listening," she said. "What do you want me to do?"

She neither confirmed nor denied his statements. Her head seemed to be spinning in the bewilderment of this utterly unexpected scene. Unreal as her meeting with Grote had seemed this was even more unbelievable. Nanetty's phrase came back to her mind. Certainly the bottom of Jessamy's world seemed to have dropped out as she listened to Yule's incredible speeches.

"We've come to the parting of the ways," he was saying. "And it must be either one thing or the other. You're going to Tudor Lodge for a few days, you say. Very well then. . . . Go tomorrow. Get right away from this house and from me. You're too near us now to see things properly. At Tudor Lodge, perhaps, you'll be able to get your perspective right. Think over the matter very deeply, very carefully before you decide, for once you make up your mind you won't be able to change it so easily again."

"But what am I to make up my mind about?" asked Jessamy, angered at his persistence.

"Whether you'll stick to me or go to Grote," returned Yule bluntly. "You admit that he loves you. You've practically admitted that you love him. If you really feel that he means all the world to you and that you can't live without him I — am ready to do my best to set you free. If you can't honestly tell me that, I'm going to stick to you, Jessamy, and fight for you tooth and nail. There's got to be no more drifting. You've got to be my woman, my mate. You've got to come right away with me to some quiet country place where you'll let me teach you to love me. . . . By God, I believe I could do it, too. Jessamy! . . . Jessamy! . . . Won't you let me try?"

Jessamy sprang up to face him as he came towards her. To her surprise she found that she was trembling with some sudden violent emotion. Was it anger or a queer exaltation? . . . She could not tell. She put out her hands to keep him at bay. He caught them and held them tightly.

"I decline to be a bone between two dogs!" she cried. "Let me go, Yule. You are behaving abominably, I think. You talk of womanly qualities. Are you respecting mine? Is this bargain, this choice a dignified one?"

"Dignified or no, it's necessary. . . . Understand this, Jessamy. If you decide to stick to me, remember you've got to be mine in every sense of the word. I must be your man, your mate. I won't have any shadowy thirds. You may see as much of Claire as you wish — but I don't expect you'll want to see very much of her if you stick to me. Our worlds don't amalgamate. I can't breathe in her atmosphere. Apparently she can't breathe in mine. . . . And it's got to be either Grote or me, remember. Whatever way you decide it can't be both. . . . So that's that."

"Yule! You're mad!"

"No. I believe I'm sane for the first time in my life," cried Yule exultantly.

"Let me go."

"Not till you've promised to do as I asked."

"You and your preposterous ultimatum!"

Jessamy tried to wriggle out of his grasp, but his thin hands were locked round hers inexorably.

"No, you don't. . . . Not until you've promised."

"Oh, very well, then. On your own head be the consequences!"

"I'm ready to face them."

Amber looked for a moment at the lovely angry face so near his own: the face that filled his thoughts, his heart, waking and sleeping. Jessamy's long curly eyelashes were still wet. The sight made him lose his head a little.

He dropped her wrists, but before she could move his arms were round her. He pressed her so closely to him that she could scarcely breathe. He groaned as he showered passionate kisses upon her hair, her throat, her cheeks.

Jessamy lay passive under the sudden violence of his onslaught. When at last he released her she staggered a little.

"You brute!" she said in a low scornful tone.

"I — I'm sorry," he stammered, feeling dazed now that he had come to his senses again.

"You're not sorry," she returned, preparing for flight.

"Very well, then. I'm not sorry," he answered, putting out a hand to steady himself by the mantelpiece, as she slipped past him.

"You've made me hate you," Jessamy said from the door.

"I've made you think of me, anyhow."

"There's no fear that I shall ever forget tonight."

"I hope you won't," said Yule.

She was gone. He heard the light patter of her feet up the stairs, along the passage and into her own room

overhead. The sharp closing of a door followed, and then the click of a key turned in the lock.

Amber winced. "She needn't have done that," he thought. "Have I ruined everything?"

Then he flung himself down on the couch and lay there with his face hidden until the fire flickered out and the room grew as cold as his own hopes.

IX

It was nothing unusual now for Jessamy to breakfast in bed. She invariably did so after her late nights. She enjoyed the rest and luxurious reminiscence of past gaieties, unhampered by the necessity for making polite conversation downstairs. Therefore it was no surprise to Nanetty when she found herself alone at the breakfast-table next morning with Yule.

Instantly her quick eye noticed some subtle change in him. His step seemed lighter: his eyes held a spark that had long been lacking: a fighting spark, as she read it. Curiosity pricked her, but she made no attempt to satisfy it until Yule's material wants had been supplied. Then she said:

"What have you been up to, Yule?"

Yule gave an odd little laugh. "I? What do you mean, Nanetty? Why should you think I've been up to anything?"

"Haven't I known you, man and boy, for over thirty years? Do you think there's a twist or a turn of you that I don't know?"

"This is dreadful!" groaned Yule in mock alarm. "I never realized that you were such a thought-reader. . . . Well, I have been up to something, as you put it."

"What?" asked Nanetty, a tinge of anxiety creeping into her voice.

"Burning boats."

"Again? Oh, Yule! . . . How this time?"

Yule told her. When he had finished he looked keenly into the eyes so like his own.

"Have I done right, Nanetty, or have I been once more the fool you're so fond of calling me?"

"Time alone will tell. . . . Personally, I think your only folly was in not presenting your ultimatum long ago. I'm afraid you've let them get a grip on Jessamy now."

"I had to be fair. I had to let her have a proper chance of judging."

"That would be all very well for reasonable beings like you or me, but the young have to be led a little, whether they like it or not."

Yule pondered this for a moment. Then he said slowly:

"One of the tragedies of life is that the old nearly always forget what they were like when they were young, while the young won't believe that the old ever could have been 'sweet and twenty' like themselves. We've each got to live according to the light that is in us, whether it's a rushlight or a star. Other people's illumination is no earthly use to us."

"I've warned you before that you're following a marshlight, Yule: an *ignis-fatuus* that will lead you into a quagmire if you're not careful."

"No, it won't," said Yule, with his rare smile. "This time, Nanetty, I really am following a star. . . . My star. . . . I can't help it if it leads me into stony places instead of the green pastures that I long for. I'm acting in the only fair, straight, honourable way. Jessamy married me under a misapprehension. Now that that has been cleared away it's up to me to set her free if she wishes it."

"I can't feel that it has really been cleared away, somehow. You realize, of course, that this means drag-

ging your clean name through the mud of the Divorce Court?"

"Even so," Yule answered, his lips taking the obstinate line that Nanetty knew of old.

There was no use in further argument.

"When is Jessamy going to Tudor Lodge?"

"Today, I think."

"I'd better run up and see her, then, before I go out."

"Where are you going to?"

"Don't you remember what I told you about my commission? To copy that little Botticelli Madonna in the National Gallery for some rich American? Cardew got it for me. He'll have his commission, of course, but indeed I don't grudge him that."

"How stupid of me! I'm afraid I had forgotten. I'm sorry, old thing."

"I quite forgive you," smiled Nanetty. "You had much more important things to think of."

Later, she tapped at Jessamy's door.

"Come in," called a voice with a tiny edge on it.

Nanetty entered, to find the room in a confusion of delicate garments, silk stockings, shoes and hats. Jessamy, the flushed, bright-eyed centre of the vortex, was hastily packing a trunk. An open hat-box stood near it.

Nanetty watched her from the doorway for a moment.

"You seem in rather a hurry," she said dryly.

"Yes. I am in a hurry. I'm going to Tudor Lodge today. I suppose Yule has told you," answered Jessamy without looking up.

"Yes."

The crisp monosyllable seemed like a full stop to further intercourse. That did not suit Jessamy's mood. She raised herself to her knees and this time she stared at Nanetty.

"Did he also tell you that he has practically turned me out?" she asked defiantly.

"No."

"Well, he has, then."

"Jessamy, you know that's a lie."

"Thanks," said Jessamy curtly, bending to her packing once more, with hands that shook at their folding and placing.

Nanetty melted. . . . Jessamy looked so young, she was so foolish, she might so easily make shipwreck of her own life and Yule's.

"I shouldn't have said that, Jessamy. But you know perfectly well that Yule would never turn you out."

"What else is it, then? . . . Delivering his ridiculous ultimatum and telling me, like an old-fashioned melodrama, that I must choose between Tudor Lodge and Caroline Place! . . . I never heard anything so absurd in my life. Now, did you?"

"I admit that Yule's a fool. He should have smacked sense into you long ago, and then there would have been no need for these scenes."

"Smacked sense into me?" Jessamy was almost speechless with fury. "You're just as bad as he is."

"Worse," returned Nanetty imperturbably.

"After all I've done for him ——"

"Come, come, who's being melodramatic now? What have you ever done for poor Yule except to bring torment and misery into his life? You've made the house pretty enough with your chintzes and fallals, I grant you, but man can't live on silk cushions alone! He had enough of that with his first wife."

"Indeed? Poor woman, I am beginning to pity her!" said Jessamy, trembling with anger.

"You needn't. She was perfectly happy, being absolutely blind to everything but her own perfections. . . . Just as you are!" Nanetty ended unexpectedly.

Jessamy jumped to her feet. "How dare you?"

"Don't you realize yet that I would dare anything to make Yule happy? . . . What he sees in you I can't imagine. To me you're just an ordinary pretty girl, like

a thousand others, nothing in you that they couldn't duplicate over and over again . . . but there it is! To him you're the one woman in the world. He has never cared, will never care for any one else. You have some glamour, some enchantment for him. . . . Oh, I don't know what it is. But you have it . . . and he adores you, to his own torment. Don't think he ever complained. He didn't. He's not that sort. But I'm not blind. I've seen something of what you've been making him suffer. You've messed up his life enough as it is. Think well before you spoil it altogether. Have you any conception of what it would mean to Yule — clean, sensitive Yule — to have to stoop to sordid tricks and let his name be dragged in the dust in order to give you your divorce? . . . No, I don't suppose you have. . . . But he'd do even that for you. Don't act in a hurry. Think well before you get rid of Yule. You may tramp the world from end to end before you'll find such another. He's worth fifty million of your gross-minded cave-man, Grote, and I only hope you'll find it out before it's too late."

"I've listened to you with great patience," said Jessamy in rather a quavering voice. "And all I can say is — No, I won't say it. I'd better not. I want to part on as friendly terms as I can, in case — in case I don't come back again. I'm *not* ungrateful for past kindnesses. I haven't forgotten how good you both were to me that nightmare time, but — well, Yule can be a cave-man, too, when he likes!" She bit her lip to still its quivering, and the flush deepened and spread down her delicate neck.

"He should have started those tactics long ago," said Nanetty grimly. "Well, goodbye, Jessamy, and may the Lord put some sense into your foolish little head!"

She turned on her heel and went out of the room, leaving Jessamy a-gasp.

She continued her feverish packing until she had put

together all she could possibly want for a week or more. Then she went to her bath, still in the grip of that hot, excited, tangled feeling that would not let her think coherently.

Fragments of retorts she might have made to Nanetty buzzed tormentingly in her brain.

"It will be a relief to get away from them," she told herself defiantly. "To be in a well-ordered, quiet house, where I shall have time to think, and where I shall be treated as a reasonable being and not considered either a fool or a child. . . . And I *have* done a lot for Yule. . . . I've smartened up the whole place. Look how pretty I've made the house! Even Nanetty had to admit that. . . . Maybe they'll be sorry when I've really gone . . . if I really go. . . ." Quickly she altered the form of her sentence, feeling, in spite of her sustaining anger, a little prick of compunction at the thought of leaving this quaint charming old house, where she had at least found a peace that was now hers no longer: that might never be hers again.

She hastily finished her toilet and rang for Emma.

"Get me a taxi, please, Emma," she said when the maid appeared. "I am going away for a — for a few days. I'm only taking that trunk and a hat-box."

One must keep up appearances before the servants, she thought, with a swelling consciousness of her own worldly wisdom. Then she crossed the corridor to Yule's room and entered almost upon her knock.

Yule was standing near the window, his hands in his pockets. He swung round as she came in. The table was unusually tidy. He had evidently not been working at all. So much Jessamy noticed before she said in a level tone:

"I'm off now, Yule. I've just sent Emma for a taxi."

"Oh," said Yule stupidly. "You — you're starting early."

"The earlier the better," returned Jessamy, drawing

on her gloves. "I shall catch Claire before luncheon."

"Yes. I suppose so. . . . Jessamy — about what we were saying last night ——?"

"Well?" asked Jessamy stiffening.

"I — you — for God's sake don't keep me too long on tenterhooks!" Yule broke out. "You must take your own time to consider, of course. I don't want to hurry you in any way . . . but make it as mercifully short as you can."

Jessamy looked at him with a curious sense of detachment.

His face seemed thinner and more lined than usual in the strong Spring sunlight. His eyes were almost cavernous, so deeply sunken were they. He seemed to have lost all the buoyancy, the whimsicality that had once rather charmed her in spite of herself. He was suffering, obviously . . . and suffering was ugly, disturbing. . . . She hardened herself against any such insidious appeal.

"I — will write to you," she conceded.

"If you decide against me . . . let this be the end."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean . . . that it's better for us not to see each other again."

"Ever again?" echoed Jessamy dismayed. "But I shouldn't mind seeing you."

"I should," returned Yule with a twisted smile. "Let me take you down to your taxi."

"And say goodbye in the street like that?"

"Just like that. . . . In spite of appearances I really haven't got the melodramatic mind. Come along, Jessamy. I hear your taxi ticking the precious pennies away."

"Oh, if you can only think of such sordid things!" Jessamy turned and went quickly out of the room, choking with chagrin and anger.

Without another word she entered the waiting taxi.

"Tell him, Tudor Lodge, please," she said coldly.

"Very well." Amber held out his hand. After an instant's hesitation Jessamy put hers into it.

"Goodbye, Yule," she said, with an air of offended dignity.

"*Au revoir,* my 'sweete Hell and sorrowfull Paradis.'" he answered very low. "I am not going to say goodbye."

Her hand felt cramped when he dropped it and turned to give the address to the taxi-driver. She rubbed it as the car started. On an impulse she put her head out of the window and looked back at Caroline Place, glowing warmly in the morning sunlight, with its budding plane-trees and busy sparrows: an oasis of peace: scene of an interlude between an epoch and an epoch. Would she ever see it again, she wondered dully.

Yule still stood on the pavement, but he had ceased to look her way now. Mrs. Waldron was coming down her own steps with the second-last baby in her arms.

"Ha, fat rascal!" said Yule, pulling its curls.

"Mr. Amber, you're looking awful!" cried Mrs. Waldron. "I hope you haven't got a chill."

"More likely a burn, Mrs. Waldron," he returned. "I'm afraid that I've been playing with fire!"

X

"My dearest child, what a delicious surprise!" said Claire Wyatt.

She held Jessamy's hands and kissed her on both cheeks. The warmth of her welcome, the luxurious aspect of the house, the smiling maids, the general sense of well-being thawed the chill that had crept about Jessamy's heart during the drive to Hampstead.

She had planned a frank confession of the situation to Claire: she had looked forward to the luxury of recount-

ing Yule's intolerable pronouncement and revelling in Mrs. Wyatt's warm sympathy and understanding; but now that the moment was actually upon her she felt singularly disinclined to make any confidences.

"I've got back into the world of nice ordinary things once more," she thought. "Let me enjoy it as long as I can." Aloud she said: "I thought you wouldn't mind my taking you by surprise like this, Claire."

"Darling, of course I'm only too delighted."

"I had a sudden impulse, and you know how prone I am to act on impulse," Jessamy continued with a flush and a deprecatory glance at her stepmother.

Claire smiled tenderly at her. "I don't mind your indulging in any impulses that bring you back to me," she said softly. "Now that you're home again, I hope you won't be in any hurry to run away."

It was an unfortunate phrase. Claire realized that as soon as it was uttered. The little sharp-edged silence was scarcely perceptible before she bridged it with a trivial query.

"Have you given Watson your keys, dear?"

"Yes, Claire."

"That's right. Your room is always ready, you know, but we'll give her time to unpack your things before you go up. What would you like to do after luncheon?"

"Anything you wish."

"A matinée?"

"No, not a theatre, if you don't mind. I think what I'd like best would be to drive somewhere into the country."

"Happy thought! We'll leave town and go and look for the spring." Mrs. Wyatt rang the bell and when the maid appeared gave orders that the car was to be brought round at half-past two.

"Oiled wheels!" thought Jessamy with a little sigh. "How extraordinarily smoothly everything goes here!"

Claire turned to her with a sudden air of animation.

"How is the admirable Yule?"

"Very well, thanks," answered Jessamy, but she reddened as she said it.

"They've had a quarrel," thought Claire exultantly. "That's why she ran away so early. . . . Poor Lucas! At last he has his opportunity." Aloud she said: "Shall I telephone to Lucas and ask him to join us tonight in a little family party? Then it would really seem as if you had come home again."

Jessamy's flush deepened. "Not tonight, I think, please, Claire. Let us just be by ourselves tonight, you and I."

"Of course that is what I should like best of all. I was only being unselfish. . . . Lucas has been very good, Jessamy."

"Yes," murmured Jessamy, twisting her hands together and breathing quickly. Then she said, as if the words were forced from her: "You mustn't forget that I'm married, Claire."

She gave a sigh as she uttered the feeble protest: a sigh which was deliberately echoed by Claire as she answered:

"None of us are likely to forget that, dearest. Poor patient Lucas least of all."

The luncheon-gong sounded. Both women rose with a sense of relief.

The meal was perfectly cooked and served. Mrs. Wyatt was fastidious and always had the best of everything. Jessamy enjoyed the noiseless service, the exquisite appointments just as much as the deliciously prepared fish, chicken and macédoine of fruit.

Claire smiled inwardly as she noted the swift effect of her little luxuries on Jessamy, remembering her own dictum about the flesh-pots of Egypt.

More and more did she feel convinced that matters had come to a crisis between the girl and her worthy but impossible husband. Lucas must be warned. He was

already turning restive. . . . She would try to get through to him while Jessamy was upstairs.

She rose from the table.

"We'll have coffee in the library before we start. Would you like to put on your things first, Jessamy? I hope you brought your fur coat."

"Oh, yes." Jessamy obediently went upstairs, while Claire turned into the library and took down the telephone-receiver.

In an unusually short time she had got on to Grote's office and was in communication with him.

"Your chance has come at last, Lucas," she said. "But you mustn't muff it at the last moment by over-hastiness. . . . No, she doesn't want you to come and dine tonight. She said so expressly. . . . No, I think it's an excellent sign, shows she's afraid of you — or herself. . . . No, no, no. That won't do at all. . . . 'Phone here about five o'clock. I'll see that she answers the telephone. Ask if you may come up here tonight. She will scarcely like to refuse you. . . . Then seize your opportunity. Yes, that's the best advice I can give you ——" Claire was suddenly aware of Jessamy standing in the doorway behind her, but went on as if she had not seen her — "You know I'm not over-lavish of advice, as a rule, but if you follow that I don't think you'll be sorry. . . . Goodbye. Good luck."

She rang off and turned to the table where the maid had just put down the coffee.

"Whom were you advising to seize his opportunity, Claire?" Jessamy asked.

Claire's slow smile was just a shade more careful than usual. "How clever of you to guess that it was a he, dear! . . . It was Mr. Ronaldson. He has the refusal of a delightful old manor house in Kent, but he hesitates about taking it, and he has done me the honour of asking my advice on the subject. I've urged him to clinch the matter. He won't get such a chance again."

Claire poured out coffee for both and handed Jessamy her cup. The smooth, glib explanation — had it been just a shade too elaborate, she wondered. She wished intensely that she could see into Jessamy's mind. Had she been able to do so she would scarcely have received reassurance.

Jessamy knew that Mr. Ronaldson had been in treaty about various country houses: she was well aware that he professed a great admiration for Claire, but — she could not rid herself of a queer uncomfortable suspicion that it was not Mr. Ronaldson to whom Claire had been speaking on the telephone, also that the conversation had in some way concerned herself.

"How horribly suspicious I'm growing!" she thought. Ashamed of her misgivings she forced herself to show that she believed Claire's statement. "Does Mr. Ronaldson mean anything special by consulting you about his future home?"

"Anything special? Oh, I see. No, not in the least, you absurd child! Why, he's over head and ears in love with Topsy Willoughby, poor man!"

Jessamy flushed. "I think it's rather disgusting the way all these men are in love with married women!"

Claire gave her a quick amused glance.

"They can't help it, poor dears," she said tolerantly.

"They could help letting everybody else know all about it."

"Darling innocent!" murmured Claire, giving Jessamy's cheek a little caressing pat, which made her suddenly feel as if she were about five years old.

"At least at Caroline Place they *expect* me to be a woman," she thought, with a swift, utterly unlooked-for reaction.

But it was impossible to feel either suspicious or resentful as she nestled down in the luxury of Claire's beautiful violet car, which moved almost noiselessly through the traffic of the streets and purred its quiet way

along semi-country roads, whose villa-gardens were already burgeoning with all the gay colours of Spring.

The cool touch of the air on Jessamy's cheek refreshed her: the sunshine thrilled her like a song: the sight of the surging life around her, in man and beast as well as flower and tree exhilarated her oddly. She forgot all that irritated her. She put the thought of Yule and his ultimatum behind her for the moment, as she listened to the mild *chronique scandaleuse* which Claire's clear voice was recounting, with a reassuring sense of amused worldly wisdom. Claire, quick to note shades and moods, was subtly pouring balm on the vanity which she had scratched by calling Jessamy a darling innocent. She talked to Jessamy now as one married woman to another: and had induced in the girl a sense of almost luxurious contentment by the time the violet car turned in once more at the gates of Tudor Lodge.

They were just going to tea when the telephone bell rang.

"See who it is, like a darling," begged Claire.

Jessamy ran into the library, as she had done many a time before in answer to a similar appeal. She had the odd dreamlike sense of having lived through this more than once as she took the receiver down.

"Is that Mrs. Wyatt speaking?" She heard immediately in Grote's voice. The sound shook her.

"No. . . . Do you want her?"

It was as if the net of memory, suddenly flung round her, jerked her back into the pool of the past, washing out all that had gone between. . . . How often had she stood there in this very room talking on the telephone to Lucas?

"Yes, please. But who is speaking? Is it you, Jess?" Grote's voice rang exultantly.

"Yes."

"Are you at Tudor Lodge?"

"Yes."

"Will you be there this evening?"

"Yes . . . I'm staying here."

"Splendid! I was going to ask Claire if I might come round after dinner. Will you be in?"

"Ye — es."

"Good. Then expect me about nine. I'll count the minutes till I see you." Grote rang off, giving no time for denial or protest.

As Jessamy turned away from the telephone with fluttering pulses, her eye was caught by the little Dutch picture on the wall: Nanetty's picture: the first link in the chain of circumstance which so strangely bound together Tudor Lodge and Caroline Place. In the bewildering swirl of her thoughts she accepted Yule's quaint personification of their dual destinies with a sense of fatality. Even as her father bought the mellow little picture Tudor Lodge and Caroline Place were converging inevitably towards each other. . . . Was it Fate? Had all this been written? . . . She looked at the picture for a moment with a touch of awe. Then she went back to the drawing-room.

Mrs. Wyatt glanced up from the tea-table.

"Well, who was it, dearest?"

"Lucas," answered Jessamy. "He wants to come round tonight after dinner."

"I hope you didn't put him off, darling?"

"No," said Jessamy, her voice still shaken. "He didn't give me a chance. He rang off as soon as I said we weren't going anywhere."

"Wise man," smiled Claire. "He doesn't want to risk the chance of losing his poor little half-loaf."

She turned the conversation to other topics with her usual ease, wondering meanwhile when Jessamy was going to tell her about her falling out with Amber. She was glad that affairs were coming to a climax at last. Lucas was daily growing more difficult. She was getting tired of her own rôle, too. She felt that she had nobly

earned that extra thousand a year, which was going to take her on a world-tour, to places where she would play a more important part than that of second fiddle.

When at last Jessamy rose to go to her own room Claire detained her with a gesture.

"You're going to be kind to poor Lucas tonight?" she queried softly.

"Kind? . . . What do you mean, Claire?"

"Darling, don't think I don't realize how awfully hard it has been for you both. . . . There's no lover like one's first lover, the man who opens the gates of Paradise to you and shows you the way in. . . . Let Lucas open the gate again, dearest."

"Claire, what are you urging?"

"I? Nothing, Jessamy, but a little kindness to the man who has loved you so long and so faithfully. If only you were free I know what I should urge."

"But I am free," cried Jessamy, the words out almost before she knew. "Yule will set me free whenever I wish."

"Jessamy! . . . Oh, my darling, why didn't you tell me this when first you came? You knew how I would have rejoiced." Claire made a movement as if she would have embraced the girl, but Jessamy shrank away.

"I — I — it all seems rather indecent," faltered Jessamy.

"Poor love, no wonder! But things will soon right themselves," smiled Claire with easy optimism. "I can't think of anything but the one blessed fact that you and Lucas will be happy at last."

"Claire, you're very generous," said Jessamy turning away with reddened cheeks.

"I? Oh, no, dearest," answered Claire.

But her deprecation rang as false as her sentiment had done if Jessamy had only had the ears to hear it.

The girl was numbed to all else save the imminence of

the decision which she had to make. Claire's easy way of taking things for granted seemed to draw the net closer about her. At least Yule had left her free, had deliberately cut her adrift from any entanglement of memory, place, or mood. Claire seemed to surround her with a closely-woven mesh of all three.

She went up to her room dazed as in a dream.

XI

Still in a dream Jessamy did her hair and changed into the frock which Dawson had laid out upon her bed. It was one of the new gowns which she had bought for her recent gaieties: a simple little ivory-white dinner frock, with a sash of soft gold tissue knotted loosely at one side. White silk stockings and gold shoes were placed in readiness, and a gold fillet for her hair.

As the girl gazed at her reflection in the long mirror she wondered what she would feel like, what decision she would have made by the time she looked into that glass again.

She honestly did not know. Her mind was in a turmoil of uncertainty. At thought of Lucas she was conscious of a strange sensation, half fear, half physical thrill. She sat down suddenly on the side of her bed, her hands unconsciously gripping the linen and lace bedspread.

"I must think. I must think," she murmured desperately.

Take Lucas first. . . . Of course she loved him . . . she had always loved him, except when she had hated him, and one always hated most the person whom one loved best. . . . He loved her, too. He *had* been patient, as Claire had said. Never had he overstepped the boundary of friendship which he had set between the old days and the new, except with his eyes, his hungry, burning eyes.

Jessamy shivered with a queer little thrill at the thought of those eyes, of whose fire she was always conscious when in his presence, whether she was looking at him or not. . . . Hungry eyes . . . disturbing eyes. Yule had never looked at her like that . . . until last night. How rough, how outrageous he had been last night! He had almost hurt her physically. She still felt angry at the thought. . . . But he was her husband, after all. He had never taken anything else. It was she who had taken everything, and given nothing in exchange, nothing that really mattered any more than the frills and pink cushions of his first wife. Nanetty, with her sharp tongue had stripped her bare of her muffling little pretences. . . . Would it be fair, would it be right for her to take still more from Yule and buy her own happiness at the price of his honour?

That was what it practically amounted to. She knew now what honour meant to Yule, to Nanetty. . . . Reluctantly she forced herself to admit that it did not seem to mean as much here, where people laughed and made a joke of men's love-affairs with married women. . . . "And *really* married women, too," she told herself hotly. "Not like me. Oh, how can they? . . ." Next moment honesty compelled her to ask herself: "How can I?" She buried her burning face in her hands. "Oh, I don't know. I don't know! . . . Why is everything so dreadfully complicated?"

She did not realize that it was she herself who had complicated matters when she had run out of Tudor Lodge and into Yule Amber's life. She was incapable of clear thinking in that bewildering moment.

"If only I had a little longer time to think. It all seems to have rushed on me so suddenly. I'm not ready. I'm not prepared. . . . Does Lucas mean all the world to me? Do I feel that I can't live without him? Oh, I don't know. . . . I don't know. I can't be sure till I see him again."

She rose and straightened the bedspread mechanically, looking longingly at the quiet refuge the white bed offered. If only she could creep into it and lie there quietly, undisturbed in her thinking! . . . She shook her head.

"I mustn't run away again," she thought. "I've got to face it out this time."

She dusted her flushed face with powder and went downstairs.

Claire surveyed her with distinct approval as she entered the drawing-room.

"How lovely you look, darling!" she exclaimed. "That's a most becoming little frock. Who made it for you? Anne Silke? Ah, I thought so. She has quite a touch of her own."

Jessamy, snatching at the harmless topic of chiffons, discussed it feverishly until the dinner-gong sounded.

"I'm having a small bottle of champagne tonight," smiled Claire. "Just to celebrate your home-coming. You must take a glass, dear. It will do you good."

Jessamy, sipping the wine rather distastefully, found that it really did help her to pull herself together. Both women were conscious of a sense of climax, against which they talked during the progress of the meal. Claire sketched plans for the future, airily but conclusively.

"You will like to go abroad, dearest, for a time. The Swiss mountains in the summer are really delightful, and the Italian lakes are quite possible until August, I believe."

"It's always pleasant to plan tours even if they don't come off," smiled Jessamy, feeling the pull of the net and thinking, even as she spoke, of other things — "Here I have no choice. Tudor Lodge has chosen for me already."

The maids left the room as Claire rejoined:

"But you must go somewhere, dear, while you're wait-

ing for your divorce, or annulment, or whatever it is, to go through, and you'd like to get out of England, naturally."

"Oh, don't," said Jessamy, with flaming cheeks.

She felt smirched already at thought of contact with these sordid, dingy backstairs of life. Then, on a sudden impulse, she leaned forward: "Don't tell Lucas about — about Yule and me tonight, please, Claire."

Mrs. Wyatt lifted her heavy white lids. "Why not?"

"I — I don't know, only I'd rather you didn't. Please, Claire."

Really, the girl looked extraordinarily pretty tonight. Her heightened colour was most becoming and the great pleading eyes looked enormous in her delicate little face. . . . Mrs. Wyatt smiled.

"Just as you wish, dearest, of course." Inwardly she thought: "Lucas must play his own hand now. He's been dummy long enough. It's my turn to efface myself." Aloud she said: "We shan't have coffee until Lucas comes. He always says he gets better coffee here than anywhere in London."

"Yes. It's delicious," agreed Jessamy, her pulses fluttering. "I — I've forgotten my handkerchief, Claire. I'll just run up and fetch it."

"Send Dawson, darling."

"I'd rather go myself. I'm not used ——" she stopped abruptly and ran up the stairs.

When she had found a handkerchief to give colour to her errand she stood in the middle of the room for a moment fighting hard against the sudden gust of nervousness that shook her. She had the disturbing sense of being rushed into a decision for which she was by no means prepared, and it frightened her. Then a quieting thought came.

"Claire won't tell Lucas tonight and I certainly shan't. We can be just nice and ordinary until I've properly worked this thing out. It's only fair to Yule

that I should be quite, quite sure of my own feelings before I ask him to — what was it Nanetty called it? — drag his clean name in the mud. . . . Of course I don't love Yule, not in that way. But I do like him, and he *is* clean, and good — and safe. I — I trust him, in spite of the outrageous way he behaved last night." Jessamy, full of a new worldly wisdom, shook her gold-bound head. "Men are queer. They're different from us. They — take things differently."

With a sudden new sense of security she turned to leave the room, and ran down the stairs with a lighter heart than had been hers when she mounted them. Crossing the hall towards the drawing-room she heard Claire's voice raised to a sharpened note of annoyance.

"How could I possibly tell you when I 'phoned you after lunch? I didn't know it myself then."

"Well, better late than never, I suppose," came in Grote's unmistakable tones.

Jessamy stood still, her hands clasped together in sudden consternation. . . . The mean suspicion for which she had chid herself had not been unwarranted after all. It *was* to Lucas that Claire had telephoned, and the conversation *had* been about her. It was all a lie about Mr. Ronaldson, a glib, prompt lie. . . . If Claire had lied about that might she not also have lied? . . .

Jessamy gasped at the abyss that appeared to yawn suddenly in front of her. That long-ago evening seemed to repeat itself in crude and cruel detail. But this time she was not going to run away. Her months at Caroline Place had given her a new outlook, a higher courage. There was still Lucas to cling to. He, at least, had not deceived her. . . . Perhaps Claire hadn't, either. Oh, she must be sure . . . she must be quite sure. . . .

She pushed one of the chairs in the hall to give warning of her coming, and walked into the drawing-room with head erect, in spite of her thudding heart.

XII

GROTE sprang up to greet her, his eyes shining as he came towards her. Jessamy noticed how extraordinarily bright they were as she gave him her hand. He kissed it before he led her forward to the deep chintz-covered chair he had placed in readiness for her.

"This *is* a piece of luck," he said. "I knew, of course, that you were coming to stay here sometime, but I had no idea that it would be so soon."

"Nor I," answered Jessamy, trying to speak lightly. "I made up my mind in a hurry, as usual."

"Darling, your coffee is quite cold," said Claire plaintively, shooting a warning look at Grote. "I wouldn't have poured it out ——"

"It doesn't matter," Jessamy thrust in, reaching out for her cup.

"It does matter," said Grote masterfully. "Put this away, Claire, and give her a fresh cup."

Claire obeyed with a smile.

"Drink this, Jess, you're looking pale," Grote said.

"Am I?" Jessamy took the coffee-cup from him.

"She was rosy enough a short time ago," said Claire with what the Victorians would have called an arch air.

"We must bring back those roses again," Grote said in a tone out of which he could not keep his exultance.

Jessamy felt hemmed in: surrounded. Lucas seemed suddenly to have taken possession of her. She had never noticed such possessiveness before. Was it because she had always been dimly conscious of Yule in the background? But now Yule had sent her away alone, to face the future and make her choice unaided. . . .

Her pallor, her shyness, her evident perturbation were alike adorable to Grote, tribute to his masculinity as he felt them to be.

There was a certain tension in the atmosphere which Jessamy, at least, made no attempt to ease. Her mind was whirling again. She felt almost as if she were walk-

ing on a quicksand, where any movement might plunge her into choking depths out of which she might never rise. . . .

Was there anything whatever solid, stable, unshifting in this strange new world? Anything to which she might cling in her desperate need? Surely Lucas . . . he was so strong, so big, so masterful. . . .

As in a dream she saw Grote ring for the coffee-cups to be taken away: saw the maid enter and remove the tray: saw Claire rise with one of her slow graceful movements: heard her say:

"You'll excuse me if I leave you for a moment. I've just remembered a telephone message that I must send."

Jessamy turned to her with a strange look, wild, appealing, accusatory.

"Is it to Mr. Ronaldson, Claire?"

"No, not this time, darling," Mrs. Wyatt answered, startled at the thrust. She turned when she got to the door and looked sharply back at Jessamy.

The girl was staring into the fire with eyes that saw nothing! Claire's answer rang false. Claire had deliberately deceived her. Was it for the first time? Surely not . . . oh, surely not.

The door closed softly. Its click sounded to Grote like the pistol-shot that starts a race. But his race had started long ago. It was nearly over now. He was winning, he had already won . . . at last . . . at last.

He dropped on his knees, in front of Jessamy's chair and put his arms about her, prisoning her.

"You are mine now," he said hoarsely.

Jessamy started. His sudden nearness confused her.

"Let me go, Lucas. I can't think when you're so near me," she panted, trying to push him away.

"I don't want you to think."

"But I must. . . . I must."

"But you mustn't. . . . You mustn't," he mocked

exultantly. "I'm going to do your thinking for you now and henceforth."

"Then you know ——?"

"I know that you're going to get rid of ——"

"Claire told you?"

"Yes."

"When she telephoned to you after lunch?" Jessamy's breath came quickly as if she had been running.

"No, not then. She said tonight that she didn't know it then, she only suspected that there had been a split between you. She told me, just before you came in now, that you're going to divorce Amber."

"She promised me that she wouldn't," cried Jessamy wildly. "She promised . . . she lied, lied, lied! Did she lie too when she tried to persuade me that you and she weren't lovers? . . . Answer me, Lucas?"

Grote's grip tightened about her. His darkening face was very near her white excited one, his breath was hot on her cheek.

"Why rake up that old forgotten story?"

"It's not forgotten, and I must know. I must."

She shook his broad shoulders as if she would shake the truth out of him. "Tell me. . . . Tell me!"

Grote laughed. "Do you realize that you're asking me to kiss and tell, Jess? That's a thing a man never does."

"Thanks. . . . You've answered me," said Jessamy swaying backwards into the chair, faint and sick.

Grote's arms felt like bars as he pulled her towards him.

"By God, you've played fast and loose with me long enough!" he cried, his voice thick with passion. "I'm not going to let you go now. You're mine — mine!"

He crushed her slim, resisting body fiercely to him, showering kisses on her face and neck, pulling her head round until his hot, hungry lips were crushed on hers, stifling her breath.

Jessamy struggled feebly until she could fight no longer, but Grote, swept away by the rush of a long-curbed passion, scarcely seemed to notice.

His grip hurt her, his kisses scorched and outraged. Jessamy was conscious only of a sick, trembling disgust and terror. This . . . this was not love, this mad, beastlike passion. This had no cleanness, no worship in it, no faintest spark of the divine fire that must inevitably light human love at its highest.

This was not like Yule's embrace of last night. . . . She was aware of this without being able to formulate her thoughts. At last she knew that she did not love Grote, that she had never loved him, that she had only loved the glamour of love with which his ardour had surrounded her.

She felt soiled in real earnest now. Grote's crushing clasp, his hot breath, his hungry seeking mouth only revolted her. Nothing within her answered to his passion, as she lay like a dead thing in his arms.

At last he released her sufficiently to look at her. She was very pale, except for the red marks on her cheeks and throat where his caresses had hurt her.

"My lovely girl! My lovely girl!" he whispered in husky triumph. "Did I frighten you, darling?"

"Yes," she breathed through stiff lips.

Grote laughed. "You'll soon grow used to your bear's hugs and love them as much as I do."

Jessamy shivered. Her long lashes curled blackly against the pallor of her cheeks.

"You — hurt me, Lucas."

Grote laughed again. "You shouldn't be such a little icicle, then. . . . You're a woman now, Jess, and you've got to love me as a woman should. Come, my lovely darling, put a little fire into your kisses. You've kept me starving for so long that my appetite for them has grown enormous."

He bent towards her, his eyes devouring her hotly.

Jessamy shivered again and put out her hands.

"No, no, no," she cried on a rising note of terror.

"Yes, yes, yes," said Grote, his hungry lips crushing hers once more. . . .

At last he released her, his passion spent for the moment. He went and stood in his favourite attitude by the mantelpiece, looking down at her with a half-triumphant, half-shamefaced smile.

She lay in the big chair, limp and broken. Long shudders shook her from head to foot. Grote felt a touch of compunction.

"Have I really frightened you, Jess? I didn't mean to be so rough, but — you know what a feast means to a starving man?" He laughed deprecatingly. "To-morrow you'll want me to do it again!"

"Tomorrow ——" Jessamy echoed dully. She opened her eyes and rose shakily to her feet. "Tomorrow! . . . I — I. . . ." She clutched at her vanishing self-control.

At all costs she must get out of the room, away from him, away from Claire. "I — I'm tired now, Lucas," she said childishly, though in truth childhood had fled from her for ever. "I must go to bed. . . . Tell Claire not to disturb me."

"Oh, I say, you're not going to desert me like this," protested Grote.

Jessamy bit her lip to check a scream that was almost out.

"Yes, yes, please. . . . I must. . . . I'm tired. . . . Don't stop me. . . . You mustn't stop me, Lucas."

At sight of her evident agitation he gave in suddenly. . . . The girl was over-wrought. Perhaps he *had* been a bit too precipitate. He had certainly lost his head. He mustn't risk losing anything else now that the goal was at last in sight.

"All right, Jess. Of course I won't stop you, darling.

Go to bed and have a good night's rest and dream of the man who adores you!"

She gave him a quick frightened glance. "Are you that man, Lucas?"

"Of course I am, darling. Doesn't your own heart tell you so?" Grote made a step towards her.

As if his movement had suddenly galvanized her into life, Jessamy started back violently, slipped past him and fled from the room. He stirred as if to follow in pursuit, then checked himself.

"She's tantalizingly lovely," he sighed. "And much better worth while than if she were of the easy sort. . . . She'll come to my call like a bird before long, if I know anything of women! . . . Little shy, beautiful darling!"

He went to the library, where Claire was reading a French novel and smoking an Egyptian cigarette and feeling very cosmopolitan, to tell her of the success of his wooing, and to warn her to let Jessamy alone for the night.

XIII

Jessamy, behind a locked door, feverishly tore off her evening dress and the gold fillet that bound her hair.

The room was quietly welcoming. It had been arranged for the night. In the grate a little fire crackled: the embroidered linen sheet was turned down, her night-dress unfolded, her dressing-gown and slippers laid in readiness. A gay cosy covered the brass hot-water jug.

Hastily she ran to the wash-stand and poured the hot water into the basin, never resting until she had vigorously sponged away the feeling of Grote's kisses. The memory of them she felt that she could never efface.

With the physical cleansing came a sudden clarity of thought. . . . She must go away, get out of the

place as quickly as possible. In spite of her good resolutions she must run away once more. That hateful, long-ago, nightmare evening was to repeat itself down to the last detail. . . . No, no, not that. Then she had run away out into the night, into the unknown. Now, though she must again run away, she had somewhere to go, some one to run to: kind sheltering arms, that had gathered her gently out of her former troubles, would clasp her again and lift her into a place of safety. . . . Oh, the rest, the joy of the thought!

She must be quick, though. She must get away before any one thought of such a possibility. Her mind worked swiftly as she took a day dress out of the wardrobe, and put on a pair of grey suède shoes instead of her gold ones. She hastily put her toilet accessories into her dressing-case, and stuffed in her night-gown as well. Then she drew on a close-fitting hat, slipped into her fur coat, took her gold mesh bag out of her trunk and prepared for flight.

Her heart was beating so loudly that she felt as if the whole household must hear it, as she opened her door and peeped out into the corridor. No one was in sight. She switched off the bedroom light, put the key in the outside of the door, locked it and laid the key under the edge of the mat where it would not be too easily found. Then she stole along the corridor to the servants' staircase and held her breath again as she listened. Sounds of merriment rose to her ears from the kitchen premises. She was safe from observation in that quarter, that is, if none of the maids happened to be sweethearting at the side door.

She crept down the back-stairs. Luck favoured her. No one was at the door. She opened and closed it cautiously behind her, tiptoeing over to where a grass border would steal the sound of her footsteps. She took cover behind the shrubs as she hurried down the drive. When she came to the curve she ran, nor did she slacken

speed until she found herself out in the quiet residential road. There she forced herself to slow down to a walk. She did not want to attract any unnecessary attention. . . . If any one went to her room and tried to enter they would think she was asleep when they found it locked. . . . She wished that she had poked the key farther in under the mat. . . . She hoped that no one would see it. . . .

Oh, if she were only safely back at Caroline Place! It was the one thing she longed for. Beyond that, thought did not go at present. She only knew she would never feel safe until she reached that dear haven once again.

Fortune still favoured her flight. Just as she turned into the more populous district of Hampstead a taxi-cab stopped outside a house to deposit a fare. She hailed the driver eagerly and got into the cab.

"Caroline Place, Thames Embankment. Down Vauxhall Bridge Road and turn to the right by the river," she explained breathlessly. "Hurry, please."

"Know it well, lady," the chauffeur answered. "I'll have you there in a tick."

But it seemed a very long "tick" to Jessamy before the taxi turned down by the darkly gleaming river towards the old cream-coloured houses which she had left so determinedly — was it only that very morning? It seemed incredible that the events of the day, so stupendous, so epochal did they now loom in Jessamy's vision, should have taken place in a few hours.

Her pulses quickened as the taxi turned into the little bend in which the three old houses stood stranded, drawn back a little from their more modern neighbours. She put her head out of the window.

"The end house, No. 1," she said excitedly.

She did not wait for the chauffeur to open the door. She was out on the pavement before he had made his own more deliberate descent, opening her gold bag and thrusting a pound-note into his hand.

"I dunno as I've got the proper change for this, lady," he said.

"I don't want any change," she cried.

"But it's too much, lady," said the man, stirred to protest by some faint unrealized impulse of chivalry.

"It's not half enough," said Jessamy. "Please keep it."

"Aw right. Thank you, lady. Shall I wait till you gets in?"

"Oh, no, thanks. I've got my key. I'll let myself in."

The man deposited her dressing-bag on the top of the steps before he went away, puzzled but decidedly jubilant over his windfall.

Jessamy, now that her goal was reached, stood hesitant for a moment, looking at the house. There was no light in the basement. That meant that the servants had gone to bed. No light in the hall, no light anywhere — save in Yule's little workroom over the hall-door.

She wondered if he were working there. He never went to bed until late, she knew. She had often listened for the closing of his door. She would steal in very quietly, creep up the stairs, open his door and give him a surprise. Her coming like this would startle him, she knew, but oh, he would be glad . . . he would be glad. . . .

She fumbled in her bag for her latch-key. It was not there. Suddenly she remembered that she had left it on her dressing-table that morning. How stupid of her! Now she could not put her little plan into action. . . . How disappointing!

The distant purring of a motor car smote upon her consciousness. It was going at a tremendous pace, coming rapidly nearer and nearer. . . . Supposing, oh, supposing that it were Lucas — that he was coming after her. . . . In a sudden unreasoning panic she beat upon the door with her bare hands.

"Yule! Yule!" she cried. "Let me in!"

She heard the scrape of a chair pushed rapidly back. A quick step crossed the room and a head was thrust out through the open window.

"Yule, it's me, Jessamy. Let me in — quick, quick, *quick!*"

The car came nearer and nearer. To her excited imagination it was like a panting beast hot on her track. . . . like Lucas . . . like Lucas! . . . It swept along by the river as the door opened and she stumbled into Yule's arms.

"Yule! . . . Yule! . . ." she clung to him, gasping and trembling.

"What have they been doing to you?" asked Yule fiercely, drawing her into the house.

She could not answer. Her senses failed her as she lay there panting in his arms, just conscious of the blessed sense of safety, of protection for which she had longed. Amber stooped and lifted her against his breast as he had done on that first night when she stumbled into his life, into his heart. An overwhelming pity and a surging rage warred within him as he carried her into the drawing-room and sat down on the couch, still holding her closely in his arms.

The room was cold and through the uncurtained windows the light from the street-lamp without shone palely across its uncertain dusk. Suddenly pity and anger went out like two blown candle-flames. Amber was conscious of nothing but the glorious light of a dawning hope.

Out of the night she had come to him once before, unwittingly. Out of the night she had run to him now, as to a sure, known refuge. What could this sudden, this amazing flight mean but that she had chosen him . . . *him?* Nothing else mattered. . . .

At last she spoke. He bent his head to hear the quivering whisper.

"Yule. . . . I've come home."

"Yes, my very dearest."

"You'll keep me safe?"

"To my last breath."

Jessamy gave a long, long sigh of relief. "I know you will. I trust you. You're straight. You're true. You've never deceived me."

"No," whispered Yule. "Nor you me."

"I've tried to be straight," she sighed. "You'll be patient with me, Yule, won't you? You'll teach me to love you? It won't be very hard. I want to so badly. Just be gentle with me, and don't — don't *frighten* me, Yule."

On the word she turned her face against his shoulder and began to cry, not violently, but quietly, as if the tears were a relief, washing away some hidden bitterness.

Yule, with fury in his heart against Grote, held her closer but still gently. . . . Please God, he would never frighten her, never show himself unworthy of the trust she reposed in him. . . . But what had that brute done to terrify her like this? . . . And Mrs. Wyatt? . . . Why hadn't she prevented it? . . . She evidently wasn't fit to be trusted with her. What had they done between them? . . .

When the sobs stilled themselves Amber took out his silk handkerchief and gently dried Jessamy's eyes.

"Don't cry any more, sweetheart," he murmured. "You shall never be frightened or hurt again if I can help it. I'll stand between you and the world, Jessamy, as we planned from the beginning."

"Oh, Yule, Yule, you *are* good! You *are* generous! If you only knew ——" She shuddered at the thought of that evening. She could not bring herself to speak of it yet.

"It's enough for me to know that you've come home at last."

"But it isn't enough for me," cried Jessamy, with a

touch of her old impulsiveness. She straightened herself against him, holding on tightly to his coat and speaking very quickly. "I've been a beast, Yule dear, a horrid, selfish, little beast! I've treated you abominably and I'm not half, no, nor quarter good enough for you. You've given me everything, and I've just grabbed it all and given nothing in exchange. . . . I'm deadly, desperately ashamed of myself. . . . You've taught me anything I know that's worth knowing, you, with your chivalry and clean, gentle manhood and Nanetty with her kindness and crystal-clear honesty. . . . No, let me finish. . . . You're the only people who ever showed me the things that matter. You — you've saved me from — oh, from worse abysses than I ever dreamed of! . . ." Jessamy broke off, shuddering and clinging to him. "Oh, Yule, Yule. Can you forgive me?"

"Dearest, I love you. There is nothing to forgive."

Amber, profoundly touched, exalted and humiliated all in one, as love ever is in the presence of love, bent his head till his cheek touched hers.

"Sweetheart, sweetheart, let's forget what's behind us. This is a glorious new world for us both and we're going to explore it together, hand in hand, aren't we?"

"Hand in hand," echoed Jessamy. "And you'll never let me go again, Yule?"

"Never again, my wife."

"That sounds heavenly safe," sighed Jessamy contentedly.

"I hope you will always feel safe with me," said Yule humbly.

"I know I shall — dear — husband," Jessamy murmured. Then with a quick movement she put one arm round Yule's neck. "I want to be a real wife to you, my man, a real mate, if only you'll be very patient with me and teach me how."

"My heart's core!" cried Yule, hoarsely.

Their lips met and in that first mutual kiss, Jessamy

learned something of the white fire, the reverent passion of real love in its highest human manifestation: something that effaced from her memory Grote's searing kisses and the flickering marsh light which had almost lured her into the quagmire: something that seemed to open the gates of Paradise itself and show her gleams of an undreamed-of ecstasy.

Gone for ever was Yule's "sweete Hell and sorrowfull Paradis." The two had already set out, hand in hand, for that enchanted country whither —

> "Never a man may find the way
> If he look for it alone."

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